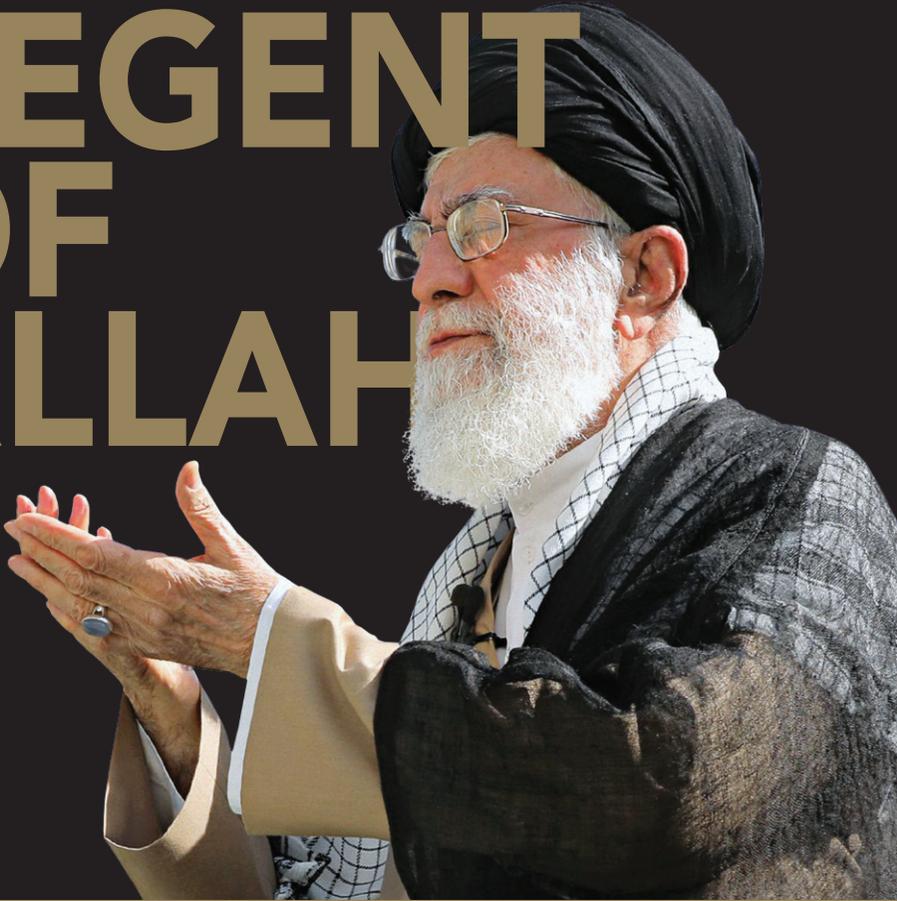


MEHDI KHALAJI

THE REGENT OF ALLAH



Ali Khamenei's Political Evolution in Iran



THE REGENT OF ALLAH

Ali Khamenei's Political Evolution in Iran

Mehdi Khalaji

THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE 
for Near East Policy

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Published in association with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, MD 20706
www.rowman.com

86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

©2023 by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote passages in a review. All images in this text are drawn from the public domain; specific sites are Wikimedia Commons, Wikipedia.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Information available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-5381-8750-0 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-5381-8751-7 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-5381-8752-4 (electronic)

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Science—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1111 19th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
www.washingtoninstitute.org

Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Author's Note	v
Preface	ix
1 Khamenei and His Worldview	1
2 Education in Mashhad	27
3 Embrace of Literature and Philosophy	41
4 Political Life Before the Revolution	53
5 Revolutionary Years and Presidency	63
6 Supreme Leader	79
7 Architect of the New Clerical Establishment	95
8 Personalist Leader	121
9 Expediency as a New Feature	165
10 Strategic Pursuit of the Bomb	177
Source Notes	199
Index	209

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy for publishing this study, and specifically to Segal Executive Director Robert Satloff, the Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in Middle East Policy, and Director of Research Patrick Clawson, the Morningstar Senior Fellow, who offered guidance, wisdom, and generous assistance throughout the process. I am also indebted to numerous friends and acquaintances in Iran who risked their lives to provide me with documents and interviews covering Ali Khamenei's life. This content helped fill out my understanding of the Supreme Leader as both an individual and a political leader. Thank you to the Smith Richardson Foundation for demonstrating extraordinary patience in funding the research for this project, which lasted much longer than originally anticipated. Enormous thanks are also due to Moses and Susan Libitzky, the sponsors of my Institute fellowship. And finally, thank you to Jason Warshof for his patience and hard work in substantially editing this text over months, and to Maria Radacsi, the Institute's publications director, who elegantly designed this book.

Author's Note

In composing an unauthorized study of the Iranian Supreme Leader and his times, the writer confronts perilous challenges, each deriving from Khamenei's status as head of an autocratic government:

- Strict control exerted by the current regime in Iran produces an environment that discourages even academic investigation and inquiry into the life of the Supreme Leader. Researchers proceed at their own risk.
- Khamenei has not granted a single personal interview to any media outlet, foreign or domestic, nor has he hosted a single press conference since taking office in 1989.
- The Iranian regime, like most autocracies, tends to eschew transparency when asked to provide details about past or present leaders, or significant historical events. Related research is accordingly subject to strict governmental oversight and revision, rendering the "official" historical record suspect.
- Shia clerical authorities record history solely through "hagiography," or idealized biography. Exacerbating the difficulty, a primarily oral culture within the Shia community discourages members from creating an extensive written record of its leaders, institutions, and significant events. Modern historians offering more objective academic methodologies have yet to succeed in penetrating this complex world.
- Ideological regimes tend to manage the narrative of their rule at all costs in order to preserve power. To this end, agents of the Islamic Republic routinely destroy significant documents, silence living witnesses, and employ propaganda to denature facts, all in the effort to

manipulate the public perception of history. A well-known photograph in Iran illustrates this troubling reality. It presents Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, on February 1, 1979, descending from the plane that brought him back to Iran from exile. Behind him stands Abolhassan Bani Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic; Sadeq Qotbzadeh, who would become foreign minister later that year; and Hassan Lahouti, a revolution-supporting cleric. All were later disgraced and deposed by the new government. Bani Sadr escaped to France, Qotbzadeh was executed in prison, and Lahouti also died in prison, under mysterious circumstances. When this popular photograph is displayed today by Iranian state media, the image is edited so that the three “disgraced figures” are rendered invisible.



- Independent publishers in Iran that are permitted by the regime to undertake historical research projects must meet strict censorship requirements. Research centers within regime organs such as the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) regularly publish their own institutional histories and subjective accounts of major events such as the Iran-Iraq War. In addition, several official bodies are tasked with collecting data and documents: the Islamic Revolution Document Center (founded in 1981), the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies (founded in 1986 under the name Institute for Cultural Research and Studies), and the Political Studies and Research Institute (founded in 1988 by Iran's Intelligence Ministry). These document centers archive official information and publish research, memoirs, data, and multimedia presentations on contemporary Iranian history. They remain, however, strictly closed to independent researchers and historians, making it impossible to verify the authenticity of documents or the integrity of the archives.

To work around the regime's strict control of information, the author has relied primarily upon Western scholarship and media sources, in both English and French. He has also conducted personal interviews with individuals who have had a close personal or professional relationship with the subject. Some of these individuals reside in Iran and some are expatriates, but all supplied firsthand knowledge and were witness to significant aspects of Khamenei's life and work.

Excluded from this book are anecdotes or accounts that (1) could not be corroborated by other sources, (2) did not meet a sufficiently high historiographic standard, or (3) were found to be inconsistent with established fact.

This book attempts to explain the life, character, and legacy of the current Iranian Supreme Leader, his involvement in the Islamic Revolution, and the probable choices or potential candidates for his successor. It will examine the evolution of the Islamist state in Iran and its core ideology as manifested in Ruhollah Khomeini's teachings on *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the jurispudent."

This study begins by providing an overview of Ali Khamenei's personal life before the revolution and the social and political context in which he was raised and trained. It then enters his "house," or office, explaining the

ways in which he built a bureaucracy without a prior model and how this structure can explain how he thinks, what he believes, and whom he trusts. Unlike Khomeini, who was surrounded by clerical disciples and apostles, his successor has kept his office distant from the clergy and instead imposed a new bureaucracy on the clerical establishment. Correspondingly, an entire chapter of this book explores the relationship between Khamenei and the clergy.

The text also examines an important source of political tension in the Islamic Republic: the dual system led by a Supreme Leader who represents a divine guide (the Shia messiah) and a president who benefits from the legitimacy conferred by a nationwide election. While the president is only in charge of the government's executive branch and his authority is tightly limited by institutions under the Supreme Leader, he can still in many cases challenge the leader's authority and affect the power equation. Additional chapters attempt to shed light on Khamenei's relationship with other political institutions, such as the Supreme National Security Council and Majlis (parliament), especially with respect to foreign policy. The book also explores the theory of *maslaha* (expediency), which puts the interests of the regime ahead of religious law in some cases, and examines Iran's strategic nuclear ambitions.

Preface

“In the name of Allah, the Lord of mercy, the giver of mercy. We belong to Allah and to him we shall return. The ethereal spirit of the great leader of the revolution, His Highness Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, ascended to the Most High Kingdom.”

—Radio Tehran, June 4, 1989

I sat with my family, poised in front of the radio through the early hours of a Sunday morning in June 1989, waiting with a mixture of hope and dread for an update on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s failing health. Now, at 7 a.m. local time, a disembodied voice drifting over the airwaves confirmed the unwelcome news: Khomeini, Iran’s first Supreme Leader, was gone. My father wept bitterly, and we all shed tears of grief.

In this indelible moment of shared family sorrow, I recalled the journey to Tehran, Iran’s capital, I had made with my father ten years earlier. It was February 1, 1979, and I was a boy of six. Despite the bleak winter cold, we enthusiastically joined the throngs celebrating the ayatollah’s return from fifteen years of political exile. My child’s eyes were captivated by the adulatory masses gathered in the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery to hear Khomeini speak, my ears mesmerized like the rest of the crowd by his forceful voice.

Now, a decade later, with the ayatollah’s passing officially confirmed, no one waited for a formally proclaimed national day of mourning. All who could travel flocked to Tehran to express their collective grief, made even heavier by the scorching Iranian summer heat. Public transportation was not adequate to meet the overflowing demand, and as a result, Tehran-bound cars were overloaded with passengers.

Standing expectantly by the road in my home city of Qom, the heart of Iran's Shia clerical establishment, I was just beginning to lose hope of finding a spot in any of the hundreds of passing vehicles. Then, at the entrance to the Qom–Tehran highway, a Toyota suddenly stopped. The driver, dressed in clerical attire, leaned his head out of the car window to extend a friendly greeting: “Welcome, Brother!”

I jumped into the front passenger seat, the back seat occupied by his wife and two children. “You look like a seminarian,” the driver began. “Yes,” I replied, “my father is Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Khalaji.” He nodded in acknowledgment. As a prominent and influential religious figure, my father was recognizable by name within Iranian clerical circles.

Because the highway was exceptionally congested, the usually one-hour journey from Qom to Tehran took more than five. But finally, we approached the capital as the sun was setting, beholding the millions who had already arrived in the crowded city. Their distinctive black mourning attire created the illusion of a single ebony mass blending into the dimming horizon. I hadn't heard any news since the official announcement of the ayatollah's death that morning, so I asked the driver if he had information about the funeral. “I haven't heard anything yet,” he replied, switching on the car radio, “but maybe the BBC has an update.”

“...Today, the Assembly of Experts appointed Ali Khamenei, the president of Islamic Republic of Iran, as successor to its deceased Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini...”

I was astonished—and perplexed. According to the 1979 constitution of the Islamic Republic, candidates for succession to the position of Supreme Leader must already possess the title of “ayatollah.” It was a prerequisite. In my bewilderment, I turned to the driver. “Do you believe that Ali Khamenei is an ayatollah?” I asked. “Of course not,” he replied. “No one does. But this is a time of crisis for the government. Maybe they will change their minds about him later.”

The cleric dropped me off at my uncle's house in Tehran, where my extended family had gathered. Entering the guest room on the second floor,

I saw that most of the men were already present, my father included. I found a place next to him. He was still visibly moved by Khomeini's death.

At 8 p.m., the television news transmitted a video from the emergency Assembly of Experts session that had taken place that morning, after Khomeini's passing. We all were transfixed by the footage of Assembly members unsealing the Supreme Leader's will, and of President Ali Khamenei ascending the podium to recite the document's contents. As was his habit, Khamenei wore the cream-colored *labbadeh*, instead of the traditional black or gray *qaba*, over his light-brown robe, giving him a chic appearance. In a robust voice that was both clear and calm, he recited the text of the will, which had been composed in Khomeini's stylish handwriting. The reading took almost three hours, an official duty that the incoming Supreme Leader discharged without interruption or any sign of fatigue. Immediately afterward, the Assembly of Experts held an off-the-record session, hidden from public view, in which members formally elected "Ayatollah" Khamenei to ascend to the role of Supreme Leader. That evening, an official announcement of the Assembly's decision marked the first time Iranian state media would refer to Khamenei as "Ayatollah." But for me, the doubt still lingered. This time, I addressed the question to my father: "Do you believe that Ali Khamenei has reached the status of ayatollah?"

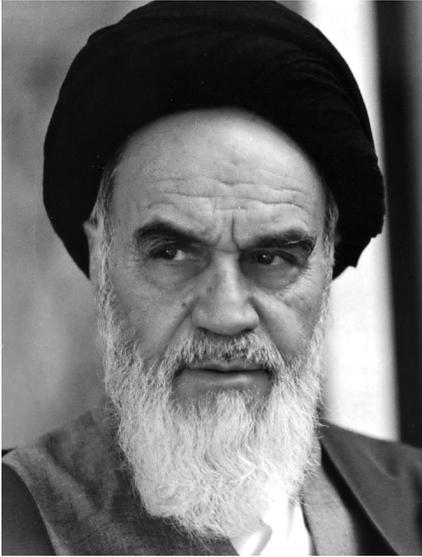
Strong loyalty to the Islamic Republic's founding leader was a filter through which my father viewed the country's politics. "Possibly," he replied. "But in any case, now is not the time to question Ali Khamenei's religious credentials. The country is mourning the loss of its Supreme Leader; and enemies, outside and within, are doubtless plotting to weaken the regime. It is wise for the Assembly to act swiftly."

But reservations about Khamenei's qualifications to rule had already begun to form within clerical and political circles. Although an atmosphere of mourning and nationalistic fervor permeated Iran's public space over the next several weeks, this emotional tide failed to overcome the nagging uncertainty about the new Supreme Leader.

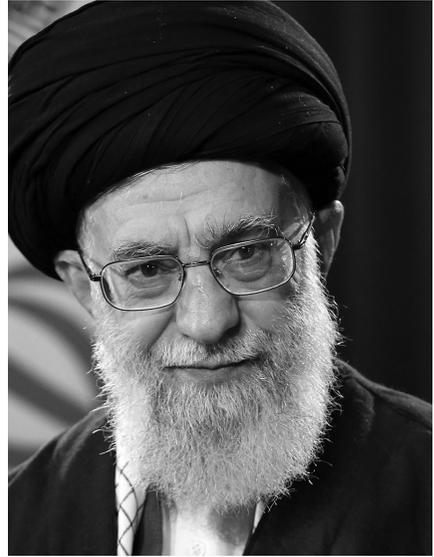
State Funeral for Ruhollah Khomeini, 1989



Iranian Supreme Leaders



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
1979–89



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
1989–

Iranian Presidents Since 1997



Mohammad Khatami
5th President of Iran
1997–2005



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
6th President of Iran
2005–13



Hassan Rouhani
7th President of Iran
2013–21



Ebrahim Raisi
8th President of Iran
2021–

1

Khamenei and His Worldview

Ali Khamenei's rise to power was a significant and mysterious sequel to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Video footage reveals that when votes cast by the Assembly of Experts were tallied and the succession was officially announced, Khamenei was visibly shocked, even displeased. Adding to doubts about his religious credentials, many observers also questioned his leadership skills. A *New York Times* editorial at the time, suggestively titled "After Charisma in Iran," noted that Khamenei held "a middling clerical rank" and that it was improbable he could "fill [Ayatollah Khomeini's] shoes."

Born July 15, 1939, in the city of Mashhad in Iran's Khorasan province, Sayyed Ali Hosseini Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was the fifth child (and second son) of Javad Khamenei, an ordinary, pious cleric, and Khadija Mirdamadi, the daughter of a cleric, Ayatollah Hashem Najafabadi Mirdamadi. Ali opened his eyes in a modest two-floor house near Nosratol Malek Street, in an old neighborhood, where he spent his entire childhood and teenage years. In the daylight hours, everyone got used to the noise of the Khorasan printing house machine, the first movable type in Mashhad, which was located in the same narrow alley.

Ali went to *maktab* (traditional religious school) from age four to learn reading and writing, and afterward started to learn Islamic theology at the Mashhad seminary. When he was eighteen, he traveled to the city of Najaf, in Iraq, and decided to pursue his theological education there, but his father asked him to come back to Iran. He returned to Mashhad after a short while, but then went to Qom in central Iran to study theology. Ali stayed in Qom from 1958 to 1964 and was introduced there to Khomeini. From 1964 until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ali stayed in Mashhad except to perform the occasional religious sermon as well as to serve jail time (in Tehran) and exile

(in Balochistan, near the Pakistan border) for his political dissident activity. In Mashhad, he resumed his studies and started to teach in the seminary, eventually becoming prayer imam at the Keramat Mosque.

Khamenei's educational background was not conventional. Under the influence of the Mashhad seminary, he became fascinated with Persian literature and started to write poems from a very young age. He frequently socialized among Mashhad's literary circles and became acquainted with modern literary genres. He loved to read novels, and according to the personal accounts of his old friends, he has read more than two thousand Iranian and foreign books. Some analysts believe that his later fear of a "velvet revolution" in Iran, and the role therein of intellectuals, is based on the literary works of Eastern European writers such as Vaclav Havel. Even now, Khamenei shows an interest in poetry, hosting poetry gatherings in his office. At such gatherings, pro-government poets gather to read their verses, and he offers comments.

An interest in Persian literature is not the only trait that distinguished him from other clerics in Qom. His religious training in Mashhad affected his worldview because of the city's anti-philosophical climate, which prefers religious rituals to abstract concepts. Reportedly, he is fascinated by arcane sciences and *muqaddisin* ("saints," in loose translation). State television has frequently shown Khamenei in public receiving people who give him their keffiyeh (white checkered headdress) to be blessed. The keffiyeh was once a symbol of support for Palestinians, but it is now linked to Iran's Basij militia. To make a blessing, Khamenei eats from a plate and leaves the rest for his followers to eat. He also resorts to *estekhareh* (an Arabic word meaning to seek good) to make critical decisions for the country at times.

Why has the Islamist state that controls Iran endured for so long? And why has the Iranian regime managed to hold on to power in the face of one debilitating and potentially fatal crisis after another? Today, the regime faces a rolling crisis of legitimacy and loss of public trust rooted in its structural governing deficiencies, incurable mismanagement, and massive official corruption. All of this has been made worse by international isolation and crippling sanctions, as well as the coronavirus pandemic.

These many challenges, taken together, might be devastating enough to

bring down any unpopular government. And yet for more than four decades, the Iranian regime has survived on the basis of revolutionary Islamism, with its delusions of religious superiority, narcissistic cravings for grandiosity, and imperialist ambitions to lead the whole of Islam. The institutionalization of revolutionary Islamism in the Iranian state and law has rendered the regime incapable of finding any effective resolution to its core flaws or of changing its predicament. Thus, at a time when so many Iranians, both secular and religious, have grown desperate for a change in how they are governed, the regime has resisted opening the doors to meaningful reform because to do so would risk ending the Islamic Revolution for which the regime stands. If anything, the regime believes that overcoming its mounting difficulties requires it to keep moving forward with its revolution. In practice, the regime has become ever more militant and totalitarian, relying on violence and new surveillance and control mechanisms to oppress its subjects, paralyze civil society, and terrorize its opponents at home and in its external empire.

In October 2019, facing protests that swept the country due to mounting economic pressure and increasing gasoline prices, the regime massacred 1,500 protesters in less than three days, according to sources. Iran consistently tops the charts for executions, sometimes even surpassing China's total, although Iran's population is less than 8 percent of China's. The Iranian regime is founded on an Islamist political theology that presupposes a fundamental division in the world between good and evil, or between Islam and un-Islam. The regime, as the leader of Islam and the revolution, perceives itself as being in an inexorable conflict with evil, especially the West and particularly America, "the Great Satan." The conflict must be waged and won before the end of the world and the coming of the Shia messiah, Imam Mahdi.

From this flows an emphasis on a particular type of jihad as the regime's sole purpose and many of the regime's defining characteristics: its implacable hostility toward the United States and Israel; its securitization of all aspects of statecraft; and, most important, its intransigence and inability to moderate. When the world is a battlefield and decisive victory is guaranteed by divine providence, there can be no "thermidor"—or period of ideological

and political mellowing and reform that so many have hoped for—only a new “reign of terror.”

Since being elevated to Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei has sought relentlessly to transform the traditional Islamic concept of jihad and to establish it as the central issue in the Islamist regime’s ideology. Neither Khamenei’s idea of jihad nor his objectives are terribly original if we recall Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala Maududi, and the other architects of modern Islamism. Each one of these ideologists and their offspring, from Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to the Islamic State, have sought to elevate jihad as the central characteristic and duty that defines being a Muslim. Khamenei’s novel contribution has been to develop a systematic juristic framework—an entire “political *fiqh*” (Islamic jurisprudence)—on the subject of jihad, which aims to respond to the regime’s practical and policy needs and to positively define the duties of Muslims to the regime and the unfinished work of Islamic Revolution. Like other Islamists, Khamenei understands jihad as politics, and politics as jihad. Through his political *fiqh*, Khamenei offers a Shia Islamist version of the political theology of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt in which the state is founded upon, and defined by, a fundamental friend-enemy opposition. In redefining jihad, Khamenei makes it the grounding of the entire ideological system of the Islamic Republic and the sole basis of the Iranian regime’s statecraft. “Without jihadist action and revolutionary work, we cannot set the country in order,” he has said.

What he means by jihad can be distilled like this: the absolute necessity of faithful and full implementation of the Supreme Leader’s orders, which legitimizes every associated effort and avoids impediments by disregarding legal and bureaucratic restraints.

Khamenei’s views and reconceptualization of jihad are disturbing because of their opaque formulation and legally fluid content. In effect, the rulings on jihad provide him, the Supreme Leader, with the absolute authority to make any kind of decision at any given time, according to what he regards as expedient. Responding to one of his followers who asks if the *veli-ye faqih* (Supreme Leader)—“in the absence of the Mahdi [the Shia Twelfth Imam, who according to Shia mythology is still alive but hides from the public and will be the commander at Armageddon]—can execute and command the

decree for jihad,” Khamenei replies: “It is within the power of *velayat-e faqih* to execute the decree for preliminary offensive jihad and most ayatollahs agree with this interpretation.” This allows Khamenei to extend his ideological concept of jihad to new fields and to coin new terms, such as “scientific jihad,” “economic jihad,” “cultural jihad,” “political jihad,” “managerial jihad,” “jihadist discourse,” and “jihadist enlightenment.”

In traditional Islamic jurisprudence, jihad was divided into lesser and greater conflicts. The first jihad is every Muslim’s never-ending battle against his own moral vices, and the latter is his duty to go to war with the enemy under the command of the ruler of the Muslim *umma* (community). But Khamenei introduces a new type of “great jihad” and justifies it with Quranic verses. He defines “great jihad...based on its Quranic and Islamic logic” as “resistance, having a disobedient attitude, and refusal to follow infidels and pagans.” According to Khamenei, “great jihad” has many “military, political, economic, cultural and social aspects,” including the “resistance economy” and “cultural war” against the West. “Great jihad” expands the notion of “evil” and “enemy” so much that it applies not only to foreigners and infidels, or domestic opponents and skeptics toward the regime, but also to those who served the regime but have lost their faith in its leader. Following the modern Islamists Qutb and Maududi, Khamenei believes that any version of Islam other than “revolutionary Islam based on the total loyalty to the ruling *faqih* [jurist]” is heretical, inauthentic, American, and corrupt. It must, therefore, be eliminated and fought like any other obvious type of *kufur* (infidelity, or unbelief) and *sherk* (paganism). Once anyone, regardless of status or background, refuses to prove his commitment to the Supreme Leader and becomes the “enemy,” state-sanctioned political violence becomes not just possible, but required.

Thus, in a 2018 speech, Khamenei authorized the security forces to “fire at will” to protect the regime’s interests. “Sometimes key think tanks and cultural and political institutions fall into disarray and stagnation, and when that happens, commanders of the soft war should recognize their duty, make decisions and act in a fire-at-will manner,” he said. In this way, Khamenei fabricated a religious justification for what the government had already decided to do.

Complete obedience to the revolutionary regime, however, is not just

a political necessity for Khamenei, but a historical one. In 2019, on the important fortieth anniversary of the 1979 revolution, Khamenei issued a carefully drafted statement, entitled “The Second Phase of Revolution: A Statement Addressed to the Nation.” He described the “Islamic Revolution as the beginning of the world’s new time”—a time in which communism has collapsed and its historical rival, capitalism, is about to disappear. He insisted that the establishment of the Islamic government in 1979 did not end the revolution, or a Muslim’s ideological duty to remain revolutionary.

Although the idea of establishing the Islamic umma is common to Sunnis and Shia, the two sects have significant differences regarding who will play the major role. While Sayyid Qutb did not focus on the differences between sects within Islam, Khamenei is focused on the idea of martyrdom through the prism of Ashura, which commemorates an event in AD 680 when the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson allegedly revolted against the Caliphate and was slain along with his supporters in the vicinity of Karbala. Imam Hussein, who was married to an Iranian princess, was a vocal critic of the Caliphate, so he was exiled to Medina in Saudi Arabia. He then fled with his supporters to join a group of dissidents in the city of Kufa in eastern Iraq. The fact that the prophet’s grandson and his Iranian bride were on their way to join a larger group of oppositionists fundamentally challenged the Caliphate’s rule, so the central government and the Caliphate decided to stop Imam Hussein at all costs. An army was sent from Baghdad to convince him to return. The Caliphate’s army surrounded his tents and waited for three days for him to surrender before killing nearly everyone.

The takeaway from this historic event and undermining of the will of the Shia to govern at least parts of the Caliphate was to always seek to overthrow the Sunni rulers because of their “betrayal of the Prophet’s offspring” and, as a result, their “waging war against Allah.” In Khamenei’s vision about the great Islamic umma, first the Shia will overcome the corrupt forces of Sunni rulers who have been unjustly put in charge of the “Haramain Sharifain” (the holy cities of Mecca and Medina), which have always been ruled by Sunni Caliphates. Thus, the first step in forming the Islamic umma, according to Khamenei, is to defeat Sunni forces and “bring them under the flag of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi,” who will then wage war against “Jews and pagans”

to “liberate the whole world from injustice and greed.”

The Islamic Revolution does not find revolutionary passion and politico-social order at odds, but rather, it defends the “theory of the revolutionary regime until the end of time.” The “new time” that the Islamic Revolution is meant to create, according to Khamenei, involves the revival and global domination of “Islamic civilization,” as described by Qutb in his book *The Future Belongs to Islam* (which Khamenei translated into Persian before the revolution). The revival and spread of Islamic civilization is a divine promise that needed the revolution and the Islamic Republic to make real in the world. In turn, building an Islamic civilization, by unifying the umma and ruling the world, is the ultimate revolutionary goal of the Islamic Republic.

“Islamic civilization: this is the objective of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Khamenei writes.

“Achieving such civilization will be possible only after the final jihad.” Prophesying the arrival of this ultimate battle of good and evil, Khamenei, in a message to the Association of Muslim Students in Europe, promised that “everything indicates the imminent rise of a unique phenomenon.” The culmination of this logic is Khamenei’s unorthodox fatwa and thoughts on the legitimacy of “offensive war” (*jihad-e ebtedayi*).

In his book of fatwas (in print and online) and in his courses on jihad, Khamenei bluntly states that “offensive jihad is not limited to the time of Prophet and Infallible Imam, and a qualified jurist who rules Muslims can declare offensive jihad, if he sees it expedient [for the regime].” Moreover, he argues that the objective of offensive jihad is “to remove the obstacles before calling [mankind] to [convert to] Islam. [Offensive jihad is] the one that Islam’s army, without facing any attack by the enemy, wages to destroy the impediments before proselytizing Islam, conversion of other lands’ people to Islam, and expansion of Islam, domination of the true ‘word,’ implementation of sharia, guiding infidels and pagans [to Islam], and subverting paganism and all faiths [but Islam].” In fact, offensive jihad’s objective is not territorial conquest, but rather defending the innate rights of those deprived of worshiping Allah, monotheism, and justice by infidel, pagan, and arrogant powers.

Traditionally, Shia believe only in “defensive war”—unless a figure

“Islam probably began as an apocalyptic movement, and it has continued to have a strong apocalyptic and messianic character throughout its history, character that has manifested itself in literature as well as in periodic social explosion.”

—David Cook, historian

regarded as an Infallible Imam governs the community. According to Twelver Shiism, the school of Islam espoused in Iran, there are only twelve Infallible Imams, or divine guides, who can succeed the Prophet, the last of which is the purported Mahdi, or Shia messiah.

Khamenei’s quasi-heretical legitimization of offensive jihad seems all the more stunning considering that his predecessor never himself turned away from the Shia orthodox view of jihad in his discourse, courses, or writings, before or after the revolution. Khomeini did advo-

cate the “export of the revolution,” provoking Muslims to overthrow their pro-Western governments and encouraging them to fight for the annihilation of Israel. But legitimizing “offensive jihad” justifies any kind of intervention, wherever possible around the world, in support of the revolution. It is a perfect premise for legitimizing Iran’s imperialism, which flows directly from the regime’s “pan-Islamic” revolutionary ideology and its totalitarian nature. In this, Iranian imperialism is different from nineteenth-century European imperialism, which was “national” and “territorial.”

As is true with many other religions, apocalypticism is a marginal trend within Islam. However, there is consensus among Islamic scholars that the apocalypticism within the Twelver sect of Shiism is the most important component of the Islamic apocalyptic tradition because it is fundamentally associated with the notion of the Twelfth, or Hidden, Imam—something that is absent in the Sunni theological system. Although Muhammad, according to Islam, is the last messenger of God, Shia regard the imamate as a continuation of his prophecy, because they believe humans should not be abandoned without divine guidance. The Imam is in charge of the affairs of the Shia community as relates to both this world and the next, until the end

of days. Meanwhile, the apocalyptic current in Twelver Shiism is a marginal trend. All Twelver Shia believe that the Hidden Imam will return before the end of time, but expecting him is not necessarily an important aspect of daily religious life.

Origins of Islamic Republic Ideology

As Hannah Arendt, the Holocaust survivor and political philosopher, once elaborated, the twentieth-century totalitarian movements of “Nazism and Bolshevism owe more to Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism (respectively) than to any other ideology or political movement.” Likewise, Iranian pan-Islamism and imperialist expansionism are rooted in ideas of cultural, racial, and religious superiority in Shia Islam. The Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri once described the nature of the Islamic Shia doctrine as a “totalitarian civilization.”

“Iranian leaders should be audacious enough to declare that the existing government is neither a republic nor Islamic,” said Montazeri, who was dethroned as the Supreme Leader’s deputy a few months before Khomeini’s death and put under house arrest by the direct order of Ali Khamenei.

Even before the revolution, Montazeri was a controversial figure in Shia seminaries. His support for the work of Ali Shariati, an Iranian sociologist, and for Nematollah Salehi Najaf Abadi, the author of *The Eternal Martyr*, generated a strong reaction from traditional clerics. Many—including clerics affiliated with Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Golpayegani—blamed him for writing a laudatory introduction to *The Eternal Martyr* and encouraging young people to read Shariati.

Before the revolution, some clerics even declared him an apostate, causing Montazeri followers in Isfahan to kill Ayatollah Abul Hassan Shams Abadi, one of his known critics. That murder only intensified the clerical establishment’s hatred of Montazeri. The act was attributed to Mehdi Hashemi, the brother of Montazeri’s son-in-law. Hashemi was tried and executed after the revolution on various charges, including his involvement in the murder. Despite the fact that Montazeri’s juridical and theological credentials were

accepted by most of the clergy after the revolution, traditional clerics still did not approve of his radical revolutionary attitude. He shared with Ruhollah Khomeini a radical interpretation of Shia Islam, and he advocated exporting the revolution by sending representatives to various Muslim countries and forming organizations such as the Islamic Liberation Movements Unit (*Vahed-e Nehzat-haye Azadi Bakhsh*), which pursued extremist agendas aimed at overthrowing Western-allied regional governments and bringing Islamists to power to fight the United States and Israel. Similarly, his son Mohammad Montazeri (1944–81)—a low-ranking cleric who spent most of his life in guerrilla warfare and the shah’s prisons—formed the Revolutionary Organization of Islamic Masses, an international Islamist body that justified the use of violence in exporting the revolution. Muhammad Montazeri’s radical behavior after the revolution damaged his father’s reputation, especially among the clerical establishment.

The totalitarian character of the Islamist state that controls Iran is captured by Khamenei’s concept of “managerial jihad.” The concept also captures the Supreme Leader’s approach to the mounting difficulties his regime faces today. In his rhetoric, “revolution” and “jihad” are one and the same. Unlike jihad, however, revolution is a modern idea that is absent in traditional Islamic discourse. By using the two terms interchangeably, the Supreme Leader means to show the religious “authenticity” and “purity” of his policies and the continued superiority and necessity of the Islamic Revolution.

In any case, Khamenei’s “jihad model” of regime preservation has sought to deal with its troubles by driving the revolution forward. The regime has aimed, through ideological engineering and force, to remind people of their religious duties to it, and to imbue society with a new zeal for revolutionary struggle (jihad). In popular rhetoric, the regime says “everything is possible” on the principle of “we can.” Moreover, as the regime’s actions have made clear, there can be no constitutional, legal, administrative, or bureaucratic restraint on what the regime wants. The Islamist state exists to create the Islamic Revolution, and the Supreme Leader is authorized and obligated to pursue that agenda by all means necessary.

The consequences of these dynamics can be seen on Iran’s streets. In

recent years, on at least two major occasions, widespread protests erupted that were distinct from the unrest in the Islamic Republic over the last forty years. They occurred in new places, and featured new participants and demands. The protesters consisted predominantly of lower-income Iranians who were reacting to very specific economic problems related to the regime's endemic corruption, from the rise of gasoline prices to a long delay in salary payments to factory laborers and low pensions for schoolteachers. The riots took place in small towns, peripheral areas, and neighborhoods throughout Iran. For the first time in its history, the Islamic government found itself faced with a new type of internal opposition, one that came from the very strata of society that the regime and beneficiaries of the 1979 revolution had always portrayed as the backbone of the revolution: the *mostazafan*, or oppressed.

To address this shocking turn of events, Khamenei, who started out as a leftist-Islamist champion of the oppressed, redefined the *mostazafan* protesters. In his meeting with the Basij militia (officially called "The Basij Resistance Force of Mostazafan"), he contradicted the regime's official rhetoric, revolutionary literature, and Islamic ideological legacy. Khamenei declared, "Who are *mostazafan*? *Mostazafan* is misdefined...as economically vulnerable people...Quran defines it otherwise...*Mostazafan* means potential leaders and rulers of mankind's world, that said, future heirs of Earth and its entire possessions; '*mostazaf* [the singular form] refers to the one who is potentially the heir of world, the potential regent of Allah on earth, the potential Imam and leader of humankind's world." In reaction to the October 2019 protests, Hossein Nejat, the cultural deputy of the IRGC commander-in-chief, revealed the regime's concern about lower-income Iranians by accusing Western powers of supporting and using "the lower class, illiterate and peripheral" to advance their anti-Islamic Republic agenda. This redefinition of the regime's former constituency as enemies has obligated the regime to ignore the facts and use more violence to demand acquiescence to its rule. Using American political theorist Sheldon Wolin's expression, the regime's reckless use of violence in recent crackdowns demonstrates that the "totalitarian dynamic" has visibly intensified in the Islamic Republic: "The totalitarian dynamic is the exact opposite of revolutionary dynamics: historically the latter has attacked the powerful and privileged."

Shia jihadist ideology relies on the idea of class warfare between the oppressed and the oppressor. Totalitarian theory turns revolutionary theory on its head: here, the enemies are pitifully weak and vulnerable. Indeed, the Iranian regime today lacks moral and political constraints in using violence and surveillance against the Iranian people, just as it demonstrates intolerance toward anti-regime and reformist elements within the ruling elite. One effect of the complete instrumentalization of religion and law has been the destruction of both. Shiism inside Iran has become devoid of substantial theoretical or conceptual content. Consequently, the cognitive value or intellectual aspect of religion is increasingly irrelevant and gives way to rituals and the merely social functions of religion. Indeed, the ideological overuse by the regime of Shia mythology, signs, symbols, and senses has led to the exhaustion of Shiism's spiritual capital.

This religious hyperinflation has also led to declining appeal of Islamist ideology, the idea of *velayat-e faqih*, and the Shia clergy in general. If one believes British statesman Edmund Burke's statement that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation," then one might conclude from all this that political change, in one form or another, is inevitable and imminent in Iran. Yet the Islamist state of Iran is hardly a spent force. "The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any," Arendt famously wrote. Taking this as a criterion to evaluate the success of a totalitarian system, one needs to use caution in judging Iranian totalitarianism as a failure, or in predicting its downfall. The clergy has been deprived of its traditional exclusive position in "managing the sacred affairs" and in leading the community, including its role in protecting the people from abuse. The regime, thus, is unlikely to face much dissent or resistance from Shia leaders, who are not only unwilling but incapable of playing much of a role in protecting the people or in reforming the regime.

Given this, there might be other pathways of political change that preserve, rather than undo, the Islamist state in Iran. The quiet takeover of power by the IRGC and the security apparatus, specifically after Khamenei dies, is the most likely scenario. In other words, the Islamic Republic may survive in the foreseeable future but go through a fundamental transformation from

personal religious leadership to a military-security state, while keeping the constitution untouched and the institution of the ruling jurist as ceremonial. But in this scenario, what will happen to Shia Islamism and to the “Islamic Revolution”?

As religion’s conceptual content becomes irrelevant, the theoretical grounds for Islamist ideology may also lose salience. Growing political resentments against the regime may be, to a large extent, contained and neutralized. Over time, the principle of expediency and the regime’s formidable tools of repression, surveillance, and ideological engineering provide it with considerable tactical flexibility and capacity to suppress the opposition. Both of Iran’s Supreme Leaders repeatedly equated obedience to state law and the leader’s will with obedience to divine law and the will of Allah. If the regime can replace the seduction of revolutionary Islamism with the charm of cynical reason, it may well find fertile cultural and social ground for evolving a new form of tyranny that retains its imperialistic ambitions.

The Islamist regime has been trying hard to combine the two ideas of Persian nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism for at least four decades. Any effort to decouple nationalism from Islamism could harm the Iranian regime’s ability to demonize the United States and soften the associated antagonism between America and the Iranian people. Given the decline of Islamic ideology’s seductive force, the ideological disarmament of the Iranian regime—i.e., preventing it from misusing nationalism to cover for its ineffective exercise of power—would cost the system in profound ways.

Distinct Attributes of Shia Apocalypticism

For Twelver Shia, as noted earlier, the Mahdi is believed to be the Twelfth Imam. Shia believe he was born in 868 AD, went into minor occultation or hidden life for nearly seventy years, and since then has been in major occultation, which will last until Allah makes him appear, rise, and establish a just world government at the end of days.

In Twelver Shiism, Muhammad is not only a prophet but also the proof of Allah on Earth. Shia believe that the Earth cannot be without proof of

Allah—otherwise, it would be destroyed. Hence, after the death of the Prophet, imams would be the proof of Allah. After Ali ibn Abi-Talib, all the imams up to Ali ibn Muhammad Askari, the eleventh, were Ali's descendants and apparently lived as ordinary people. According to Twelver Shiism, the Bani Umayyah and Bani Abbas dynasties that ruled the Islamic world during the time of Ali ibn Muhammed Askari decided to interrupt the chain of imams by not allowing Askari to have a son. But in Shia belief, "Allah wanted to keep his light on," so the Mahdi was born from an enslaved woman in secret, and only a few people were permitted to see him.

When Mahdi was four or five years old, his mother put him in a well in Samarra and he became invisible. He supposedly lives in this world and watches all people, especially the Shia. But nobody will see him until Allah decides to end history and make him appear. The Mahdi will complete the Prophet Muhammad's mission of spreading Islam throughout the world. He will invite all people to Islam; if they do not accept his offer, he will kill them and clean the Earth for the believers.

Imamate theory is an extraordinarily important part of Shia theology. For Shia, an imam is more than a political leader. Shia theology can be reduced to "Imamology," just like the theological trends in Christianity that give a distinguished place to Christology. Denial of an imam is equal to denying the prophecy of Muhammad. Therefore, Shia jurists have theological problems when considering Sunnis as Muslims. An imam is the first existential reality Allah created; other existences had to be created through him. Hence, the major prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, were initially imams and then became prophets. The chain of imams must continue until the end of the world; that is why a living imam—whether apparent or hidden—is necessary for the continuity of the world.

In Shia theology, an imam has a position equal to the Quran. Both are Allah's word, but the Quran is silent while an imam is not. Understanding Islamic law is not possible by relying only on the Quran. An imam's sayings, actions, and affirmations have the same value as the Quran and Muhammad's sayings, not only in terms of theology but also in law. This is a huge difference between Shia and Sunnis. While the historical existence of Muhammad and the first eleven imams was never a matter of doubt, there is almost nothing

about the life or existence of the son of Askari—the Twelfth Imam—that has not been a subject of critical controversy. In *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shia Islam*, Hossein Modarresi Tabatabai, a prominent Shia scholar, masterfully examined the historical context of the Twelver Shia belief that Askari had a son—the Mahdi. In Shia tradition, there are many ambiguities and inconsistencies about his birth and name, the identity and name of his mother, the year he entered the well, and his disappearance, among other things. The same is true for apocalyptic literature in general. In the aftermath of Askari's death, many Shia converted to Sunnism or other Shia sects that believed in the continuity of the imam through the children of the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Imams.

The main difference between the Shia and Sunni view on the Mahdi is that, while Twelver Shia believe that the Mahdi was born approximately twelve centuries ago and still lives on Earth, most Sunnis hold that he will be born at a later date. Both Shia and Sunnis see the Mahdi as fighting Islam's enemies, but those enemies are defined very differently. In Sunni tradition, the conflict reflects the conflict that mainstream Muslims have with Christians and Jews. Sunnis define the "other" as unbelievers. For Shia, a fundamental motivation for the Mahdi to rise is to seek vengeance on the Bani Umayyah for killing the Third Imam. Their danger to Islam is considered to be more acute than the danger from Christians and Jews, and therefore Shia apocalyptic tradition lays little stress upon killing them or fighting over holy lands. Early Shia apocalyptic tradition was based on an ethnic perception. In this tradition, Persians and Turks are "enemies" and the Mahdi will kill them if they do not convert to Islam.

As one can see, this tradition reflects the historical context in which it was produced. Iranians, in their apocalyptic writings, obviously try to downplay this feature. The Shia notion of the imamate is substantially different from the Sunni notion of the Caliphate. The Caliphate is a secular and worldly political institution that is based on the separation of religious institutions from secular institutions, while the imamate relies on the Shia belief that secular power is not separated from religion. The reunion of religious and political power is basically rooted in the pre-Islamic political thought of ancient Iran. In this way, Shiism can be regarded as mostly a

Persian product, while Sunnism contains more pure Islamic and Arab roots.

Although the Supreme Leader has final say on all fundamental domestic and diplomatic issues, he does not have exclusive authority over the decisionmaking process because other officials and political forces restrict him. Therefore, the power equation between these interconnected forces plays a very important role. If democratic or moderate forces were marginalized, Khamenei would see no constraint to his totalitarian ambitions. If the political scene develops into a more dynamic interaction between different fronts, he may become more cautious, prudent, and apt to relinquish his objectives under pressure. For example, in Khamenei's theological view, waging war against infidels is completely legitimate. He is on record disagreeing with most contemporary Shia scholars by saying that any offensive war by the Islamic government is a defensive war because, by conquering non-Islamic territories, the ruler of the Islamic country defends the principle of Allah's unity and Islam.

Thus, for Khamenei, going to war is a political decision because it is always justifiable on religious grounds. But the fact that he yields to internal political pressure as well as international pressure makes him cautious about waging war against neighbors. In Iran's political structure, the president has limited executive power and does not have any say over the military, the national radio and television stations, and many economic organizations. If the president's influence over the nuclear program were unchallenged in Iran, there would be little doubt in the international community about the goals of the program and its function for the warmongering apocalyptists, notably as it was during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, Khamenei is much less apocalyptic than Ahmadinejad. His position as the representative of the Hidden Imam makes him more concerned about the stability of the government than the "chaos" which is necessary for the return of the Hidden Imam. Not one of his public speeches refers to any apocalyptic sign or reveals any special eagerness for the return of the Hidden Imam.

As the theory of the guardianship of the jurisprudent requires, the most significant task of the Supreme Leader is to safeguard the regime, even if that means overruling Islamic law. Therefore, it seems that Khamenei does not welcome any military confrontation with the West, the United States, or

Israel. Khamenei also does not follow a revolutionary ideology like that of Ahmadinejad. His continual compromises with different groups, from the clerical authority to moderate bureaucrats, show that the preservation of the government's political, domestic, and regional power is the Supreme Leader's ultimate aim. In a conflict between political ambition and the vital interests of the regime, the Supreme Leader would stand for the latter.

In Shia classical tradition, any attempt to establish a legitimate religious government before the return of the Hidden Imam is heretical, because only he has the religious right to rule in the traditional paradigm. One of the signs of the Hidden Imam's return is a deviation from Islam. According to the Quran, Allah sent the world Christianity because Jewish religious leaders altered the Torah and the teachings of Moses. The Quran also states that after Christian religious leaders altered the Bible and deviated from the true mission of Jesus Christ, Allah sent Islam and made Muhammad its prophet. Today, messianists believe that after centuries of hegemonic rule, Islam is corrupt and the Mahdi has to return in order to bring the authentic interpretation of Islam. According to the apocalyptic tradition, when he returns and introduces the "true Islam," people will think it is a "new religion," and the Islamic scholars will oppose him, giving the Mahdi no choice but to behead them. In one hadith, the fifth Shia imam said that when the Mahdi appears, "like Muhammad the Allah messenger, he will destroy everything that was before and resume Islam from the beginning."

For apocalyptists, the history of Islam is nothing more than a process of decline and decadence. For fundamental apocalyptists, Medina, Muhammad's government, is the worthiest example of ideal Islamic society and politics. Since Muhammad could not achieve everything he wanted, the Mahdi will return to accomplish what Muhammad left uncompleted. Despite the fact that the Quran depicts the events of the end of days and portrays the chaos that will occur in natural order, it is very difficult to extract a consistent image of what would happen before the end of the world. In many cases, references to the cosmic chaos come without any mention of the end of time. In general, a reader of the Quran and the hadith finds that the end of world is imminent, but knowledge of when the world will end is reserved exclusively to Allah—even Islam's prophet cannot foresee it.

For this reason, classical Muslim scholars did not comment or elaborate much on religious apocalyptic texts, and considered the determination of when the world will end an impossible task. Prominent scholars of the Islamic world are confined mostly to the simple narration of signs and features of the apocalypse without trying to apply it to a specific time. For example, in a few of their books, these scholars wrote about signs that would accompany the end of days. It is worth noting that the Shia apocalyptic tradition has bloody visions about what will happen when the Hidden Imam returns. According to the tradition, when the Mahdi appears, there will be two kinds of death, red and white, each claiming a third of the world's population. The red death will be from the Mahdi's sword and the white will be from the plague, leaving only a third to survive. In some hadith, the Mahdi will kill two-thirds of the world's population, and he "will clean the earth from nonbelievers and deniers [of Islam]...he will continue to kill the enemies of Allah until Allah is satisfied." The Mahdi "will order his twelve thousand soldiers to kill anyone who does not believe in your religion."

There are many contradictory hadith that deal with Jews and the Mahdi. According to one hadith, a young person with a short beard and pale look will rise with a few soldiers, carrying the flag of Mahdi, and conquer the city of Jerusalem. Another hadith states he will destroy it. Yet another states that when the Mahdi returns, most Jews will convert to Islam. However, there are many hadith in Shiism that say Jews will be killed: "When the Mahdi returns he will fight with Jews and kill all of them. Even if a Jew hides behind a rock, the rock speaks and says, 'O Muslim! A Jew is hidden behind me. Kill him!'" It is worth noting that these sorts of hadith are Arab-centric; that is, the Mahdi in this tradition is an Arab leader who confronts Jews, Persians, Turks, and members of other ethnicities. The ethnic nature of this tradition is manifested in the deep concern about the power of Persians before the return of the Hidden Imam: "Allah's Messenger said that Allah will make Persians superior to Arabs soon. Persians will hunt you like a lion then kill you and confiscate your properties." In brief, most of the apocalyptic wars would be between Arabs and non-Arabs rather than Muslims and non-Muslims.

While some hadith describe the events that take place before the Mahdi returns and others describe what the Mahdi will do when he appears, both

types are descriptive and neither urges the worshipper to do anything to hasten his return. The only duty of a Shia worshipper, according to the classic apocalyptic tradition, is to pray for the health of the Mahdi and pray that the worshipper will be alive when the Mahdi returns so that it will be possible to fight under his command. Apocalyptists, who form a marginal trend in religious society, tend to transform the passivity of the worshipper into active identification of the signs of the Mahdi's return. Apocalyptists try to match the events, heroes, and anti-heroes of apocalyptic scenarios to the events and people of their own time. This is problematic for orthodox Shia because, in the Islamic tradition, it is prohibited to foretell the future. Imams have forbidden Shia to determine the time of the Mahdi's return, and it is not permitted for anyone to claim to have seen the Mahdi or have had contact with him. Shia, accordingly, are bound to deny anyone who brings such a claim.

But history does not always correspond with theological creeds. In the course of Islamic history, many people have claimed a relation with the Mahdi, gaining both respect and credit with worshippers. Since the resurrection of the Mahdi has been delayed, many Shia have had no other choice but to prove that he is alive and justify the possibility of such a long age for an ordinary human being. Therefore, claims regarding meeting the Mahdi became justified and, in many cases, necessary in order to assure that the community would not lose faith in him.

An apocalyptic vision relies on Islamic rituals more than culture, knowledge, and reason. Hence, it rejects the traditional methods of understanding Islam as practiced in Islamic philosophy or Islamic law. It deals more with religious mythology than abstract theological concepts, and uses customs and rituals to provoke the imagination and generate social dynamism in favor of the apocalyptic vision. In the Iranian social imagination, notions like sacrifice and hope are associated with the idealized image of pre-Islamic heroes embodied in Shia imams. Contemporary apocalyptists use this social image in order to mobilize people for apocalyptic purposes. Therefore, apocalyptic visions are attractive to ordinary people and can be spread easily in society. Messianists are usually clerics with low theological training or nonclerics with little knowledge of Islamic theology. Most apocalyptists

believe that when the Mahdi comes, he will discredit the hegemonic interpretation of Islam and bring a true interpretation. Apocalyptists constantly seek new interpretations of the sacred texts to bolster their convictions. Hence, conservative, traditional clerics are usually anti-apocalyptists because they are committed to preserving the established tradition.

Traditional theologians do not tend to apply the apocalyptic tradition to their own time period by involving themselves in damage control. It is no accident that prominent seminary publishing houses do not publish new apocalyptic books. The dominant ideological approach of the apocalyptists is easily understood interpretations of religious texts and reliance on the literal meanings of words. They reject the use of reason in interpreting the religious texts and the reference to words in their figurative sense.

“If we combine the capacities in Islamic countries such as Iran, Iraq and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, if the hands of the Muslims in the region come together, then they will demonstrate Allah’s glory in forming the Islamic umma,” Khamenei said in a speech to Iraqi militia advisors in 2019. He was talking about the importance of Arbain ceremonies in Iraq. Arbain, which translates as “the fortieth,” referring to the fortieth day after the day of Ashura, is a political protest in Iran. During the days of Ashura and Arbain, Shia Iran mourns the death of Imam Hussein in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Imam Hussein was the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and was slain by the Umayyad Caliphate. Shia have been using the days of Ashura and Arbain to commemorate the killing of Hussein as a way to protest the Sunnis’ thousand-year rule over majority Shia provinces in the Middle East.

However, since the Islamic Revolution, the regime has used Arbain as a political protest against “the Imperialism,” especially the United States. The proceedings happen in the city of Karbala, where many pilgrims travel miles on foot. As of 2016, 18–19 million pilgrims traveled to Karbala for Arbain ceremonies. The regime in Iran takes advantage of this event to solidify its base in Iraq and display solidarity and force against Sunni and Western influence. Khamenei has focused on the Ashura and Arbain days as a way to counter “Western cultural invasion” against Muslim nations. “In an era that Islam’s adversaries are spending a treasure...to work against Islamic values...

our best bet is to introduce the Imam Hussein ideology (martyrdom) to the whole world,” he said. “Arbain is a global ceremony, people from around the globe know the importance of Arbain and they come for pilgrimage. Today’s world is suffering from injustice, imperialism and repression... Imam Hussein’s message of martyrdom will set the world free. Our fidelity is to spread his name across the globe.”

Hence, apocalypticism in general advocates a superstitious religion. One of the most important aspects of this approach is the credit given to prophecy and arcane science. A *muqaddas*—a revered man who is not necessarily a cleric—foresees the future and the destiny of individuals. For example, Shah Nematollah Vali, known as the “Iranian Nostradamus,” made predictions for world events until the end of time. Another practice is to ask permission from a *muqaddas* to use one of Allah’s names. If a worshipper repeats one of Allah’s names with permission from a *muqaddas*, that name gains a special spiritual force and helps fulfill all the worshipper’s aspirations. This practice is called *zikh* and some mystics believe that certain *zikh*s, who are called *esm-e azam*, or the “greatest name,” can even move mountains. They hold that the “greatest name” is a secret and that only true believers can know because the *muqaddas* would not issue permission to somebody whose heart was not fully dedicated to Allah.

Muhammad Taqi Bahjat, the mentor of Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, is an imam of the Fatemiyeh Mosque in Qom and also a *muqaddas* who attracts many people from around the country. Interestingly, Bahjat also played an important political role. In order for Khamenei to become the Supreme Leader, he had to have the minimal credentials to be certified to be a cleric and thus make clerical judgments (*ijtehad*). Khamenei had great difficulty getting a certificate because he had not been much of a clerical student. Even though Khamenei was not Bahjat’s student for a single day, he issued him the certificate. Many clerics in Qom say Khamenei frequently visited Bahjat in the past two decades and asked for *zikh*s. Bahjat has a reputation for issuing *zikh* permissions only for *khavas*, or special individuals. It is a common perception that Khamenei believes Bahjat is one of the most credible current *muqaddisin*.

Apocalypticists are particularly prone to *estekhareh*, which in practice

describes consultation with Allah for guidance. A worshipper can utilize estekhareh for almost any end, but it is commonly used for marriage. A family that receives a marriage proposal from a man often asks a cleric for an estekhareh. If the result is positive, the girl's family accepts the proposal. Methods for estekhareh include necromancy, divination, augury, sortilege, and bibliomancy. But the most common modern method is to use a string of beads (*tasbeeh*) and—most important—to use the Quran (bibliomancy). The practitioner of estekhareh takes the Quran in both of his hands and reads some prayers. Then he opens the book and reads the first line on the right page, and must give his impression of what Allah recommends to do. Some people in Qom and Mashhad are famous for their special ability to conduct estekhareh, and receive requests from all around the country by phone, fax, and email.

One of the best-known people for this arcane practice is Muhammad Ali Gerami, a Qom-based ayatollah. In his memoir, Gerami wrote that he considered himself a spiritual mentor who influenced the destinies of many of his disciples. "There are some people that I personally took care of their spiritual training and now they are in the high level of spiritual state and even can travel [from Qom] to Karbala and Najaf in one second," he wrote. This practice is called *teyyo al-arz*, literally "folding up of the earth," an Islamic term for teleportation. He also claims that he met regularly with Hazrat-e Masoumeh, the daughter of the seventh Shia imam, who died in 817 AD. In his memoir, Gerami explains his view that estekhareh is one of the miracles of Shiism. "Many people ask me for estekhareh," Gerami wrote, "even sometimes for important issues of the country. Once, I got an estekhareh phone request from Ahwaz. I told them I did not have time. They said it was not personal but that some oil wells had caught on fire and the national wealth was burning up. They said they had some plans to control the fire but they needed estekhareh to choose one. I did estekhareh for them and fortunately their work was a success."

The ayatollah adds that even judges request estekhareh for issuing judicial orders. Since the Ahmadinejad era, estekhareh has become a religiously prestigious way to make decisions, with divine consultation preferred over human decisionmaking. Ahmadinejad is known for asking for estekhareh

in critical situations. The practice became so popular that Rasul Jafarian, a fundamentalist cleric, wrote an article criticizing the leaders of the country for using *estekhareh* or other arcane techniques as a decisionmaking tool. Jafarian explicitly mentions statements about the destruction of Israel and writes that these kinds of statements, which give an exact date for the destruction of Israel, are based on divination and cannot be true. He also implicitly accuses Ahmadinejad of not taking the U.S. military threat seriously because some arcane scientists told him there would not be any attack on Iran. Jafarian quoted “one of the great practitioners of *estekhareh*” who said that he is in charge of half of the country’s affairs because the authorities come to him and ask for *estekhareh*. Believers in *estekhareh* sometimes seek responses from the Hidden Imam, whom the *velayat-e faqih* system claims to represent on Earth until Armageddon and the imam’s resurrection.

A cynic would note that the Supreme Leader’s rule is based on the absence of the Hidden Imam, on whose behalf he rules. Once the Hidden Imam reappears, the Supreme Leader is out of a job. For that matter, if every devout believer can be in direct contact with the Hidden Imam, then what need is there for jurisprudence to tell the believers what to do in the Hidden Imam’s absence? In short, messianism undercuts the Supreme Leader’s power and position. Since the Islamic Republic faces a real problem encouraging people to become more religious, it has an ambivalent attitude about messianism. The political and economic crisis of the regime caused mistrust among ordinary people about the use of Islam by the government. At the same time, the Islamic Republic’s ideological approach has theoretically discredited traditional Islamic theology.

To overcome the crisis of faith in the last decade, the state media and other official communication channels and institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, are trying to popularize Islam by promoting a simple version of the religion as manifested in the rituals. Government officials campaign for religious days and ceremonies and spend a huge portion of the state budget on religious places and institutions. The result has been the dramatic flourishing of the Mahdi cult in the country. For instance, the Jamkaran Mosque on the outskirts of Qom—where tradition says that the Hidden Imam appeared in the dreams of a pious man in the eleventh

century—did not have any special religious meaning for Iranians until the past few decades. It has been transformed from a very small and modest mosque to a colossal holy shrine, and according to government statistics, this mosque has millions of pilgrims every year along with unique regulations, rituals, prayers, and customs. There is a well in the mosque with two entrances, one for men and one for women, into which needy or sick people drop petitions and money for the Hidden Imam to grant them their prayers.

In recent years, technology has been used in the service of these rituals, with Shia worshippers able to send their petitions or money through the Jamkaran Mosque website. Also, worshippers can email their petitions and transfer money to the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad. But the Islamic Republic is not always satisfied with people's participation in such rituals because they are not controlled by the state and the traditional clerics. A new class of *maddahs*, religious singers who are not clerics and have no theological training, has emerged and been welcomed by Iranian society, especially by the younger generations. They are propagating a version of Islam that is not ideological, and they use modern music and melodies, popular poetry, and erotic and romantic images to praise the Shia imams. The young women who attend the religious ceremonies of the new maddahs wear makeup and clothes that do not meet the Islamic Republic's official standards. This threatens the government's control of religious affairs, and can imperil the government's use of Islam for its own purposes. People are reluctant to go to mosques and listen to a cleric preach, but many are eager to participate in religious ceremonies run by a maddah. Not only the religious authorities in Qom but also Khamenei and members of his office, such as Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, the former speaker of the Majlis and a prominent conservative, warn about the untrue Islam promoted by maddahs and the spread of superstition by people claiming to be in direct contact with the Hidden Imam. Many people who make such a claim tell their followers that the Hidden Imam is angry with the Islamic Republic and its leaders.

The revolution has given a new understanding to the apocalyptic tradition in which worshippers are obliged to take some action to hasten the return of the Mahdi. This new politicized apocalypticism is influenced more by modern ideologies, such as Karl Marx's philosophy of history, than by

theological tradition. Just as the Marxist tradition states that class conflict is necessary for the emergence of a classless society, new apocalyptists believe that fighting injustice is an obligatory step toward readiness for the appearance of the Mahdi. The main mechanism that new apocalyptists use to give religious legitimacy to their political behavior is to find a correspondence between signs of apocalypse foretold in Shia apocalyptic literature and the present day. They try to portray themselves as heroes and their enemies as the antiheroes of the apocalyptic narratives, which are being acted out in the present day. In other words, apocalyptists find audiences only when they claim that the end of days is near and that they represent the forces of good against those of evil.

For example, according to the tradition, before the appearance of the Mahdi, a group from the East will rise up and face the world's tyranny. Masoud Pour Sayyed Aqai, a close associate of then president Ahmadinejad, said that according to a hadith, "the people of Iran will rise up and pave the way for the return of the Hidden Imam." Identifying today's events and political actors with the signs of apocalypse allows participants to pretend that, to hasten the return of the Hidden Imam, special people have special missions. Davoud Ahmadinejad, the former president's brother and head of the Special Investigation Office of the President, likened Ahmadinejad's story to that of Moses and the Pharaoh. He argued that just as Moses stood up to the Pharaoh and brought liberty to his people, so too Ahmadinejad stood up to his U.S. counterpart, President George W. Bush, heralding the imminent return of the Hidden Imam.

New apocalyptists tended to link Ahmadinejad's rise to the increased prevalence of vices such as prostitution, drug addiction, economic corruption, and cultural decay. In their view, Ahmadinejad was effectively tasked with facilitating the return of the Hidden Imam by fighting internal and external "corruptors of the Earth." For Ahmadinejad's advisor Muhammad Ali Ramin, the increase in vice was part of a conspiratorial scheme for "Jewish domination" over Muslims, exemplified by Israel's occupation of the Muslim holy lands in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The rise of vice was also due to the distortion of Islam's sacred texts by agents of colonialism, especially the "empire of America." The United States occupies a preeminent place in

this “pantheon” of Western demons, not only for conducting an unjust war in Iraq and supporting the heinous policies of a Zionist state but also for reimposing colonialist rule over the Iranian people, pressing the country on its nuclear program, enacting economic sanctions, and mobilizing the world against the Islamic Republic.

2

Education in Mashhad

Construction of the religious schools of Mashhad began in the AD 900s, but only after a millennium did they begin to flourish and attract a significant number of students. In the early 1900s, the religious training offered at Mashhad was unique in at least two respects. First, seminarians were discouraged from taking up studies undergirded by rationalism, such as ancient Greek philosophy and traditional Islamic philosophy. A strictly rational interpretation of religious texts was forbidden, viewed as a deviation from “true Islam.” Instead, Mashhad academic agendas strongly emphasized ritualism within Islam and included the practice of Islamic mysticism. The second way in which Mashhad training was unique involved the emphasis placed on Persian and Arabic literature.

In the twentieth century, Mashhad’s madrasas began to attract religious students from all around the country and, to some extent, from the Shia communities in the region. Historically, the province of Khorasan (later divided into three provinces) was the center of Sufism, mysticism, and Islamic philosophy, while Mashhad became a center for exoteric interpretation of Islamic texts and pious Islam. That piety has been used strategically by the clergy.

Ayatollah Khomeini used it in almost every image in which he appeared, and he was very careful not to be pictured with Western books or even Western furniture. He barely sat on a chair, but preferred to sit on the floor with very little or no carpeting. Khomeini’s successor has tried to follow the same path, but his circle has been less careful about excluding Western elements from his pictures. Pictures of Khomeini alighting from German- or American-made cars are widely available. Also, before the revolution and even during his presidency, he was observed and filmed smoking a pipe,

which was very common and popular among Marxists. Khamenei has always been careful not to flaunt the enormous wealth he has gained since the revolution. According to reports published in the Western media, he owns foundations worth billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and factories.

The images of his “bayt” (home) depict him in settings with minimalist trappings. Khamenei refrains from any type of interior design. Although some estimates suggest his wealth exceeds \$90 billion, which according to *Forbes* would make him the world’s tenth-richest person, he claims to eat very little. His trusted sources and sycophants constantly talk about his piety. His chief of staff, Gholam Hossein Mohammadi Golpayegani, once told reporters, “We are proud to live in a country where the head of state lives below the middle-class line.”

Some of these claims are hard to believe. For example, the director of endowments and religious taxation once told reporters that “Hazrat-e Agha” (Khamenei’s title, roughly His Lordship) is usually in debt and “he borrows money from me or sometimes I see him calling the guards telling them, here is your money back.” Mohsen Rafiqdoost, the former minister of the IRGC, once claimed that “Hazrat-e Agha is so pious, he does not even have a refrigerator in his house...I think someone recently gave him one.”

Mashhad’s centuries-old role as a religious city is perhaps not as well known to Americans as that of Qom, whose seminary was rebuilt at the end of the Qajar Dynasty (1780s–1920s). Despite the anticlerical policies of Reza Shah, Qom benefited from his support as the center of Shia authority was transferred from Najaf. The shah’s policies also prevented Najaf clerics from interfering in the domestic political process, as occurred during the Constitutional Revolution in 1906. In the course of this revolution, influential Najaf clerics, who had quite a remarkable number of followers in Iran, were supporting constitutionalists against the monarch.

Mashhad-Rooted Extremists

Unlike other academic hubs of Shia theology such as Najaf and Qom, Mashhad distinguished itself as a center of Persian literature, boasting prominent scholars of the genre. In this singular environment, Ali Khamenei developed a fascination with mystical Islamic practices and rituals that would become a permanent feature of his religious formation. He also took advantage of the unique opportunity that Mashhad afforded to acquaint himself with modern Persian literary genres, including novels. As a writer of poetry himself, Khamenei grew in his love of Persian literature and endeavored to join Mashhad's intellectual circles, which consisted mostly of writers and poets at the time. At this stage of his life, the young Khamenei wore a wristwatch and let his hair grow under his turban, all deviations from the traditional practices then considered sacred for seminarians, while also sometimes smoking his pipe.

But despite these secular digressions, Khamenei remained a cleric in training and identified with the Shia religious establishment. During this period, however, Mashhad's world of literary salons, to which Khamenei exhibited a growing devotion, began to express strong anticlerical sentiment. Therefore, as a somewhat nontraditional seminarian, Khamenei was considered suspect not only within Mashhad's secular intellectual scene, but also among the ranks of traditional clerics. Throughout the Mashhad years, he would continue to straddle both worlds without being fully recognized as a member of either.

Mashhad has been important in the development of several groups of religious extremists, three of which are central to revolutionary Iran: the separationists, members of the Hojjatieh Association, and the *velayatis* (discussed later).

Separationists

Mirza Mehdi Gharavi Isfahani was a cleric who relocated from Najaf to Mashhad in the 1920s and founded a theological movement that has since become known as the “separation school.” Isfahani held that individuals could be honored by a visit from the Twelfth Imam, and his disciples believed that he met the Hidden Imam personally and that the imam approved his theological views.

Isfahani strongly believed that philosophy and logic were foreign sciences and therefore un-Islamic. To him, the logic of people who study religious texts was fundamentally opposed to the logic of the Greeks, which is based on philosophy and human knowledge. He explicitly rejected the causality principle in Greek logic. For him, syllogism does not lead the human mind to the correct deduction because the human mind is unable to understand cause and effect without divine guidance. In his major books, *Abwab al-Hoda* (The Doors of Guidance) and *Mesbah al-Hoda* (The Light of Guidance), he states that through comprehensive and subtle research, he could achieve “pure Islamic truths.”

Mashhad’s cultural and religious ambience was heavily influenced by the separationist, anti-rational, and anti-philosophical approach. In the period of Isfahani, most clerics in Mashhad regarded philosophy as “something anti-Islam[ic] and separated from Islam.” Isfahani trained many disciples, such as Sheikh Mojtaba Qazvini, Sheikh Hashem Qazvini, Zein al-Abedein Tonkaboni, Mirza Javad Aqa Tehrani, Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, Hasan Ali Morvarid, and Sheikh Abdullah Emami Torbati, all of whom became well known and widely respected in Khorasan, the Iranian province whose capital is Mashhad. Also among Isfahani’s disciples were the three Hakimi brothers, Muhammad, Ali, and Muhammad Reza, who became popular outside the seminary due to their mastery of Arabic and Persian literature and their outstanding prose, which was something completely new in the field of disseminating Islamic thought.

In 1971, Muhammad Hakimi published *Dar Fajr-e Sahel* (In the Shore’s Dawn), which had a huge impact on spreading Shia messianism before the revolution. The Hakimi family continued to influence religious culture and

politics after the revolution by writing different books and articles about Islam, social justice, and Mahdism. Hassan Rahimpour Azghadi, a hardline fundamentalist cleric and son-in-law of Muhammad Hakimi, is an unofficial but influential cultural advisor to the Supreme Leader and an outspoken critic of modernity in Iran. One person who was influenced heavily by the separationists was Ali Shariati, a significant Islamic ideologue of the 1979 revolution. Muhammad Reza Hakimi revealed the connection between the anti-philosophical approach of Mashhad separationists and Shariati.

Shariati was fascinated by arcane science. When he was a professor at the University of Mashhad, especially between 1967 and 1968, “word got out that Shariati was a psychic involved with occult practices,” and on many occasions, Shariati told his students and friends that he could summon spirits. Interestingly, Khamenei was a close friend of Shariati and largely influenced by him. Their friendship started when both regularly participated in a poetry circle in Mashhad in 1957 and 1958 and lasted until Shariati’s death. Even after the revolution, Khamenei praised Shariati while most of the clerics hated and condemned him as a heretical writer.

The Hojjatieh Association

The religious ambience of Mashhad generated different circles and associations devoted to defending “authentic” Islam. Among them, the Hojjatieh Association (*Anjoman-e Hojjatieh*) rapidly attracted the consent and support of both the clerics and the shah. The Charity Mahdavidist Association of Hojjatieh (*Anjoman-e Kheiriya-ye Hojjatieh-ye Mahdaviyya*) was founded in the aftermath of the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq by the charismatic cleric mentioned earlier, Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, whose birth name was Mahmoud Zakerzadeh Tavallai. Halabi was a direct disciple of separation school founder Mirza Mehdi Isfahani.

The explicit mission of the Hojjatieh Association was to confront the “threat of Bahatism” and its expansion. In Bahai teachings, Islam was superseded by the Bahai faith. Therefore, Hojjatieh sought to defend Shia Islam by emphasizing the concept of the Hidden Imam and insisting that he was

still alive and awaiting for Allah's order to reappear. Mahmoud Sadri, a former member of the Hojjatieh Association, points out that "between the early 1950s and early 1970s, a great number of the future elite of the Islamic Revolution had their ideological development provided by Hojjatieh." This Shia association, according to Sadri, "emulated a number of Bahai idiosyncrasies such as secrecy with respect to its bureaucracy and original literature, and the unhindered access to modern means of communication."

The political theory of Hojjatieh was the same as the traditional view of Shiism, which recognizes nonreligious government and forbids any attempt to overthrow it. In a public speech, Halabi stated, "An Islamic government is a good idea, but first find an infallible leader who can lead society by the virtue of his infallibility. People's blood, property, honor, and women cannot be handed to somebody who may make mistakes or follow his instincts. It must be handed to the Infallible Imam." Halabi, influenced by the 1953 coup, was extremely cautious about getting involved in any political activity and was eager to keep his associations far from any political militancy. In its mission statement, the association noted as one of its principles that it "would not interfere in political affairs by any means. It would also not take any responsibility for the political activity of the affiliated persons of the association."

Halabi's view on the Hidden Imam belongs to the traditional perception of Shia, in which every Shia worshipper has no other duty but to wait and pray for the Hidden Imam. Accordingly, any attempt to establish a religious government was illegal on religious grounds. That explains why Hojjatieh as an organization did not participate in the revolution and its passivity was interpreted as cooperation with the shah's government and animosity toward Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. According to a Hojjatieh publication, the responsibilities of all Shia worshippers are as follows: wait for the Infallible Imam; emulate a Muslim jurist (*mujtahid*); grieve in the absence of the imam; pray to Allah for the speedy return of the imam; cry about being separated from the imam; obey the imam's will, for only he knows the best time for his return; and give alms for the sake of the imam's health and wellness.

What was new in Hojjatieh was not its ideology but its modern and lay organizational structure. Before Hojjatieh, all religious-oriented

organizations were either clerical or traditional religious associations (*hayat*). Emad Baqi, a historian of the Hojyatieh Association, mentions that its discourse changed because of the influence of the revolution. While the concept of revolution was absent in Hojyatieh discourse on principle, in two books published by the association, *The Last Ambassador of the Revolution and Waiting* and *Seeds of Revolution*, the Hojyatieh tried to prove that the Mahdi was a revolutionary leader. But unlike the revolutionaries, pre-1979 members of Hojyatieh believed that a *montazer* (a Shia who waits for the Mahdi's return) has to conceal his true views (*taqiyya*) and remain ready to fight when the Mahdi returns. Khomeini opposed Hojyatieh during the course of the revolution for its ideological refusal to support the Islamic government, although he financially supported it in its fight against the Bahai faith by allocating religious taxes to it. On the threshold of the revolution, many young members of Hojyatieh left and joined Khomeini and his revolution.

Figures such as Ali Akbar Velayati, former minister of foreign affairs and current diplomatic advisor to the Supreme Leader; Kamal Kharazi, former minister of foreign affairs; Ali Akbar Parvaresh, former minister of education; Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, speaker of the parliament; Mostafa Chamran, former minister of defense; and Abdulkarim Soroush, former member of the Committee of Cultural Revolution (now a modernist theologian and regime critic) became Khomeini's favorites and took positions in government. Many Hojyatieh members obtained Khomeini's trust only after explicitly proving their ideological distance from the association, and many, as noted by Soroush, eventually joined the anti-regime Mujahedin-e Khalq organization.

After the revolution, Khomeini established a relationship with the repentant members of Hojyatieh who were known as the regime's conservatives. Nevertheless, he continued to believe that Hojyatieh ideology was against the revolution. In 1983, the Hojyatieh Association officially terminated its activities after Khomeini gave a speech in which he implied that Hojyatieh's belief in hastening the return of the Hidden Imam would spread corruption throughout the country. "Do not move against this wave [the wave of revolution]; otherwise, your hands and feet will be broken," he said.

Khomeini believed that Hojyatieh provoked the criticism that came from the religious strata of society. Right after Khomeini's speech, then president

Khamenei said there were two political tendencies in Hojjatieh: “In my point of view, there are some people within the Hojjatieh Association who are revolutionary elements, worshippers, honest sympathizers of the revolution, believers in the imam [Khomeini] and velayat-e faqih, and in the service of the country and the Islamic Republic. There are also people among them who are pessimists, heretics, nonbelievers, and who nag and contest. Hence, in terms of political thought and revolutionary dynamism, there is a broad spectrum within the Association and it is not limited to a restricted circle.”

In Khomeini’s last year, in a public message to the nation, he called Hojjatieh members stupid and muqaddisin who believed in the separation of religion from politics and who forbade the struggle against the shah yet criticized the Islamic Republic for not respecting Islamic law. In recent years, reports from the Ministry of Intelligence and related sources have suggested that Sayyed Hassan Eftekharzadeh, who was a disciple of Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, has restored the society. Reportedly, this society opposes the ideology of the Islamic Republic and still believes in the separation of politics and religion. The society publishes unauthorized pamphlets in which it propagates the notion of the imamate and fighting the Sunnis. The Ministry of Intelligence announced that some of its members have been arrested or are under surveillance.

Velayatis

The *velayatis* are part of a deep-rooted religious trend within the Shia community. The term refers to advocates of the authority of the imam and the theory of the imamate, but in practice, velayatis refer to Shia extremists who believe an imam is a divine, supernatural being who possesses limitless knowledge and has power over the universe.

This movement has encompassed preachers including Sheikh Ahmad Kafi, a Tehran-based figure originally from Mashhad who was active until his death in 1978, as well as other teachers from the Mashhad seminary. These personalities have a very strong social power base, sometimes beyond that of many high-ranking clerics, and appeal to the mosque-going, nonintellectual

Shia worshippers. Velayatis are very sensitive about the principle of the imamate and consider it the essence of the unity of Allah. Therefore, most velayatis regard Sunnis as non-Muslims. Velayatis are traditionally considered clerics who oppose the rational interpretation of the sacred texts and are loyal to literal exegesis.

The velayatis' ideology was very similar to that of the Hojjatieh Association. Both camps believed that the establishment of any religious government before the return of the Hidden Imam is religiously illegal, and that every worshipper has to await his return by praying and fighting other ideologies, such as the Bahai faith, Sunnism, and especially Wahhabism. Unlike Hojjatieh, whose members were mostly nonclerics, velayatis were mainly clerics. For this reason, velayatis considered themselves superior to the Hojjatieh movement, which was under the supervision of Halabi, who was a cleric of low rank. One of the main differences between velayatis and the Hojjatieh in the period before the Islamic Revolution was their manner of organization. While the Hojjatieh Association relied on a more modern, strict notion of organization and had an agenda for recruiting middle-class students from high schools and universities, the velayatis had a more traditional organizational structure and were generally favored by those in the trades and other working-class occupations.

Political Awakening

Javad Khamenei, Ali Khamenei's father, made no secret of wishing that his son would stick to the traditional path of clerical service that he himself had chosen, and in doing so avoid the pitfalls of intellectualism that always seemed to lead to trouble—mostly in the form of political unrest. Javad Khamenei came from a political family. After the defeat of constitutionalists in the city of Tabriz, many of the *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars) were exiled to Mashhad. Some regretted entering the political game and turned apolitical, including Khamenei's father. He was obviously worried about the political activities of his children, including Ali. Muhammad, the elder brother, left seminary for the University of Tehran to study law. Ali, on the other hand,

could not escape his father. Although he did not attend university, he was still eager to be recognized as a literary man within secular intellectual circles, as illustrated by his attendance at Mashhad poetry gatherings.

Khamenei's first poems were mainly trivial and he sometimes read them at the poetry nights held by the Mashhad poetry association. He had his own collection of poetry in a notebook, as he mentioned in three separate interviews after the revolution, in which he discussed his early political involvement. But if his father hoped that sequestering Ali in Mashhad would keep him away from the undue influence of politics and ambition, he was mistaken. In fact, in a dose of irony, Ali's years in Mashhad would expand his intellectual focus and lead him on a path that permanently diverged from his father's far simpler paternal aspirations. Perhaps because of its unique mix of the clerical and secular, Mashhad was, in fact, a melting pot of political viewpoints.

The programs of state modernization and secularization undertaken by Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s and 1930s, and later by his son Muhammad Reza Shah (later known as "the shah"), were first met with cautious approval. The overwhelming majority of Shia clergy were initially content that Pahlavi had ended the unpopular Qajar Dynasty, whose blatant ambitions of establishing a constitutional republic in Persia would have restricted the role of Shiism in the public sphere.

But before long, Pahlavi's attempts to extend state bureaucratic control over religious affairs met with strong resistance in Mashhad. In 1935, tensions boiled over with the enactment of a dress code for clerics. During a protest at the city's Goharshad Mosque, where religious residents expressed their outrage over this policy, police opened fire, killing several attendees. Undeterred, Pahlavi continued to roll out similarly restrictive regulations that alienated the clerical establishment and caused him to be perceived as a political enemy within the seminaries.

The city's political leadership initially supported Pahlavi's modernization agenda, regarding it as vital for a country suffering from numerous socioeconomic woes, inadequate military protection, and lack of modern infrastructure. But eventually, the Pahlavi version of secular nationalism became strongly associated with British and Western colonialism in the

minds of many of Mashhad's intellectuals. Muhammad Reza Shah came to be viewed with particular disdain in these circles as a secularist ruler under the thumb of Western powers. Simmering political disaffection began to boil over during the decades of the shah's rule, as fiat that eroded the influence of clerics were issued with constancy—and with the perceived encouragement of Western powers. In this atmosphere, Mashhad, along with other hubs of Shia learning, flourished with both Islamist and Marxist theory, which by midcentury had already spawned consequential resistance movements in developing countries across Asia and Africa.

Khamenei Rises

As Ali Khamenei became a politically active Mashhad cleric in the 1960s and 1970s, he did in fact enlist both Islamist and leftist doctrine to foment opposition to the shah's regime and cast its members as puppets of the West. Iran's own budding Islamist movement was an early influence on his intellectual formation. A group called Devotees of Islam (*Fedayin-e Islam*) was founded in 1946 by a young theology student, Navvab Safavi, aka Sayyid Mojtaba, who sought to purify Islam in Iran by eliminating perceived opponents.

Khamenei once stated that a 1951 lecture by Safavi in Mashhad on the implementation of sharia and the “deceits of the shah and Britons” strongly shaped his views and motivated him at a young age to engage in resistance activities. He was also reportedly inspired by (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood theorist Sayyid Qutb, some of whose works, such as *The Future Is for Islam* (1967) and *Against Western Civilization* (1971), Khamenei himself translated into Persian. Marxism later began to hold sway over Khamenei's political thinking and discourse in Mashhad, affecting even his systematic interpretation of Islamic theology. At one point, he went so far as to attempt a revolutionary Marxist interpretation of the “unity of Allah,” a foundational tenet of Islam. Eventually, Khamenei came to teach Marxist-influenced Islamic ideology outside the Mashhad seminary to young students from both the clerical and nonclerical classes contemplating revolutionary action against the shah.

Although the majority of religious instructors in Mashhad at the time

were apolitical, Khamenei and others began to shepherd a minor political coterie tucked away within the clerical establishment. As his influence over seminarians gradually began to represent a threat to the regime, Khamenei was arrested on several occasions. But eventually, the center of opposition to the shah would shift to Qom as young clerics in Mashhad became entranced with the forceful and charismatic personality of the regime's far more threatening opponent, Khomeini.

When the shah of Iran, with a green light from the White House, kicked off several modernization reforms in Iran, including land and real estate reform, public health measures such as national vaccination programs, and the emancipation of women, the traditional religious base in Iran was deeply provoked. Khomeini spoke against the shah and called him an Israeli and Western puppet. On June 3, 1963, while commemorating Ashura, Khomeini held a large religious gathering and, after the sermon, advised the "young shah" not to give women voting rights and claimed that this will "open the door to comprehensive and total takeover" of the country by "the decadent West." Khomeini was then arrested by the authorities. Some merchants in Qom closed their businesses the next day in protest. Hundreds of his followers demonstrated in the city and some walked toward the capital, some eighty miles northward.

The office of Prime Minister Asadollah Alam, the shah's close childhood friend, sent special forces to stop them, and they shot the protesters at close range. Khomeini was then tried and sent into exile in Iraq. The image of Khomeini returning to Iran in February 1979, descending the airplane's stairs and walking down the tarmac assisted by a young blond pilot from Air France Flight 4721, stirs very different emotions among Iranians, depending on one's experience and orientation. He is idolized as an icon among revolutionaries but for the many millions of Iranians who lived under his theocratic rule, he symbolizes an era's demise.

Khomeini ultimately declared a referendum, which was held less than seventy-five days after the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. He demanded that the vote "must be an up-or-down vote for the Islamic Republic, not a word less, not a word more." Almost all political groups in Iran, including the Communist Party and almost all Islamist-Marxist groups, endorsed the idea. As

a result, instead of having open or even limited discussions about the future form of Iran's governing body, the referendum was reduced to a yes-or-no vote on a vague idea that was by then only promoted by Khomeini. In fact, there has never been a "republic" in the 1,300 years of Islamic history. The closest idea to an "Islamic republic" is the Caliphate, which was adopted by the Bani Umayyah and Bani Hashim in the early days of Islamic empire. Khomeini mandated that all legislation be reviewed by a body of sharia experts and clerics called the Guardian Council, which eventually annulled any law passed by parliament if it was deemed "against sharia."

Khomeini's vision for the establishment of the Islamic Republic created a system that derived most of its legislative power from Islam and was totally dependent on the clergy. It also limited the clout of elected officials in the "republic" by tying their legislative agency to the consent of "the jurist." He skillfully laid the foundations of the Islamic Republic and executed the theory of velayat-e faqih. His position, which is far more powerful than that of a constitutional monarch, enabled Khomeini to establish an Islamist cult that demanded devotion and the total surrender of any "toxic" Western ideas.

3

Embrace of Literature and Philosophy

*For love of the word
I am enamored of my Khorasani fellows*

—Ali Khamenei, poem excerpt

Ali Khamenei's attitude toward poetry is different in many ways from that of his predecessor, who regarded the form as an instrument to carry mystical messages, not an end in itself or a means of generating pure literary work.

To understand Khamenei's relationship with poetry, one must glimpse the poetic tradition of Khorasan, and Mashhad's role in it. The geographic contours of the historic region known as Greater Khorasan varied over its centuries in existence, but they roughly encompassed Persia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. For more than a millennium, Greater Khorasan was known as the capital of Persian language and literature. Khorasani poets, including those in the cultural center of Mashhad, wrote in many genres, especially *qasida*, and they had a distinct "Khorasani style" of *ghazal* verse. Such a literary tradition was totally absent in Qom, the holy city where Khomeini relocated to study theology in its newly founded seminary. In Mashhad, careful study of Arabic grammar and rhetoric was also part of typical education in the small clerical establishment.

Had Ayatollah Khamenei been a novelist, he probably would have chosen Mashhad, the capital of modern Iran's Khorasan province, as his principal setting and realism as his style. He was born and bred in this holy city, where two outsize historical figures are buried: Ali ibn Musa al-Reza, the Eighth Imam of Twelver Shia Islam, and Ferdowsi, known as the Homer of Iran.

One represents Iranian post-Islamic religious identity, the other the Iranian national tradition and pre-Islamic civilization.

One of Khamenei's favorite writers, however, was born in Tehran and spent time in Taleqan, in northern Iran. Jalal al-e Ahmad, the son of a prominent cleric, was charismatic and antiestablishment. In a religious country like Iran during the 1950s and 1960s, when intellectuals settled on a political affiliation for life, Jalal was not afraid to change his worldview, as when he joined, then abruptly left Iran's communist Tudeh Party and criticized his old comrades in articles published in the *Kayhan* daily or the *Sepid O Siah* art and literature monthly. He is the theoretician of the idea of "Westoxication," wherein he compares Iranian society to diseased wheat and elaborates on what it means to be "Westoxicated." The concept is still used by the regime propaganda machine: "When you look at diseased wheat, from the outside everything looks perfect and healthy, but from the inside everything is utterly rotten..."

Unlike traditional clergy, Jalal was not anti-modernist, but he was a critic of the government's modernization and Westernization efforts. The whole Iranian bureaucracy was still new and worked with an army of American consultants and World Bank economists. He accused them of colonizing Iran and blamed them for all the ramifications of modernization on Iranian society, a trend intensified during the Pahlavi era. Jalal's socioeconomic critique was understood in political terms, including by elites and intellectuals. His *Westoxication* was later banned by the SAVAK, the shah's intelligence and censorship service, only to increase his stature among students and the religious hierarchy. *Westoxication* was copied and distributed underground. Jalal's labeling of Iran as another colony of the West, spiritually and materially dominated by outside powers, was embraced by Marxists and Islamists. Khamenei traveled several times to Tehran to meet Jalal, whom he idolized especially during the last years of the writer's brief life, when Jalal nourished religious and spiritual inclinations and became a fan, although not a follower, of Khomeini. After all, Jalal loved whiskey and drank until the end, and the Supreme Leader's fatwa would have made it *haram* (forbidden) for him to drink.

The political attitudes of many Shia clerics began to change in the decades

before the 1979 revolution. During that time, Marxist ideology was increasingly influential among intellectuals and hence became a major political threat to the government as well as to Islam. To fight Marxist influence, many clerics actually read the works of Iranian Marxists such as Taqi Arani and Ehsan Tabari. As a result, Marxism influenced many clerics and Islamic writers. For instance, Morteza Motahhari, a Khomeini disciple whose work the Supreme Leader approved as “Islamic,” started to work on the “philosophy of history” from an Islamic point of view. Not only this particular subject, but also Motahhari’s entire Marxist approach, was completely unprecedented in Shia theology. The main references in his books are to Marx or Marxist books and pamphlets. Marxism shaped not only the clerics’ “philosophy of history but also their worldview as well as their opinion on economy.” In order to defeat Marxism as the rival ideology to Islam, most clerics and Muslim writers tried to prove that Islam espoused preferable views on economics and society, arguing that Marxism was based on materialism and atheism while Islam provided prosperity for the human being in both worlds. Khomeini put a Shia spin on Marxist elements, as did many other Muslim writers and clerics at that time. For instance, Khomeini transformed the Marxist class struggle into a battle between “waxing proud” powers (*mostakberin*) and the “abased” or “oppressed” (*mostazafan*); in other words, between colonizers and colonized, good and evil, sacred and profane. In the ayatollah’s view, only the revolutionary version of Islam is “progressive” and “authentic” because only this version can provide oppressed people with the necessary means to fight the superpowers. This view implies that people should take action to improve their situation, rather than wait patiently for the Hidden Imam.

Although Jalal al-e Ahmad was a modernist, he glorified the clergy, about whom he once commented: “All these shameful treaties and agreements with the colonial powers were signed by Iranian PhD graduates and engineers, but the clergy has been wise enough to stay out of them.” When Khomeini made a fiery speech against the monarch and denounced the socioeconomic reforms dictated by the shah and his government, his course was permanently shut down and he was arrested and exiled from Qom. Jalal supported Khomeini and wrote *Dar Khedmat va Khianate Roshanfekran* (The Iranian Intellectuals’ Treasonous Service), a text that echoed themes from the French writer Julien

Freund's similarly harsh critique of Iran's elites. According to Jalal, these intellectuals served the regime by accepting its ideology of modernization.

Jalal was influenced by two completely disparate trends: One was the thought of conservative European intellectuals like Oswald Spengler and Ernst Junger, who criticized Western modernization and worried that the whole of European culture would collapse. They evinced nostalgia for nineteenth-century European bourgeois culture—and both men played roles in the rise of Nazism. Jalal translated some of their articles and books into Persian. The second trend was the anticolonial movement in developing countries, many of whose adherents were born or raised in former European colonies, like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. They vehemently denounced Western countries for their colonization policies and sometimes went as far as to advocate revenge: Fanon, for example, famously legitimized violence against European colonial powers. By embracing divergent trends, Jalal was able to effectively appeal to both Marxists and Islamists in Iran.

That encouraged Jalal to further criticize modernization and Westernization, and he expressed admiration for the Iranian tradition. Gradually, he started visiting Shia holy shrines in Qom and Mashhad and then went on pilgrimage to Mecca, about which he wrote a travelogue. He did not become a traditional religious man but rather a traditionalist intellectual; his catchphrases were “Let's go back to what we had” and “We are begging for what we already have from foreigners.” Jalal's transition to a traditionalist fascinated Khamenei as well as the entire revolutionary religious class in Iran. This is because during Pahlavi rule the clerics were largely regarded as the most regressive ideological group, detached from the mainstream media, always in a position of reaction, seemingly out of touch.

Pahlavi-era policies were anticlerical, not antireligious. One important development was the confiscation of religious endowments and their conversion into modern schools, which drew a bid by the clergy to retain popular sympathy. The religious class published hundreds of magazines funded by private donors and facilitated by mosques, and set up cultural and educational institutions very much like Catholic schools in the West, offering religious courses in addition to curricula mandated by the Education Ministry. Jalal's publications were widely promoted by the Shia clerical

establishment, whose members felt vindicated and took credit for “converting” Jalal into a traditionalist. Khamenei has publicly mentioned his interest in a similar case in communist Russia in which intellectuals were “converted” to religious-revolutionary ideology and “joined the masses.”

Islamists needed to prove that they offered the best of both worlds: unlike leftists, they were authentic because they were not disconnected from tradition, and unlike traditional clergy, they could fully adopt modern thought and create a detailed map for running the economy and creating the “new man.” Ali Shariati, who died in Britain a year before the revolution, was a renowned theoretician of Islamism and greatly shaped the discourse of Islamist revolutionaries, including Ayatollah Khomeini. Shariati was born in Khorasan and grew up in Mashhad. He and Khamenei were friends, and when news of Shariati’s death reached Iran, his friends asked Khamenei to pass the news to Shariati’s father.

A deft orator, Shariati used a Marxist framework to craft a revolutionary interpretation of Islam. For him, there were only two versions of Shiism. The first, pro–status quo, was represented by the traditional clergy who advocate monarchy and the separation of religion from politics. The second version was “red Shiism,” a revolutionary and sociopolitically dynamic stream with the goal to subvert the existing order and establish a just social and political system. This dual outlook was reiterated by Ruhollah Khomeini years later when he contrasted “American Islam” with “Muhammadan pure Islam.” The first is embodied in both traditional clergy and Arab governments, which do not believe society should be governed by Islam and Islamic jurists and therefore pose no threat to evil forces, especially the United States. The second is revolutionary Islam, which calls for radical changes to society in order to implement sharia and make religious leaders political leaders.

This Islamist left propagated its own iteration of Marxist ideology. For instance, it replaced the proletariat with the concept of the *umma*; substituted historical determinism with divine providence to make deprived people the owners of the Earth; and swapped class conflict for the struggle between the oppressed and oppressors, which would lead to the ultimate victory of the oppressed. Shariati’s interpretation of Islam is the best example of trends like this becoming extremely popular among youth, including young clerics,

because he adopted a modern socioeconomic ideology like Marxism without getting contaminated by its philosophical materialism.

This Marxist reading of Islam, or Islamic version of Marxism, proved very successful in mobilizing youth for revolution and preventing them from being absorbed by atheist-revolutionary ideologies. Khamenei himself led a small circle of young university students and seminarians in Mashhad and lectured them on “Islamic ideology” based on what he learned from Muslim Brotherhood theoreticians like Sayyid Qutb, some of whose works he and Shariati translated into Persian. When Habibollah Ashouri, a young cleric and member of the circle, published an essay titled “God’s Unity” (*Tawhid*), Khamenei became angry and a bitter fight arose between the two, with Khamenei claiming that the essay consisted of notes filched from his lectures. Soon after the revolution, Ashouri was arrested and executed, and one of the charges against him was his heretical beliefs as reflected in his essay.

Islamist ideology took the attractive elements of Marxism, wrapped them in traditional and Islamic garb, and remade them as “original,” “authentic,” and “sacred” in order to defeat “worldly,” “imported,” and “alien” twentieth-century ideologies that appealed to Muslim intellectuals. During the revolution, secular leftists allied with Islamists because at that stage, the goal was to topple the shah and empower anti-imperialism. Fighting imperialism or anti-Americanism had the unique potential to attract youth, and Islamist leftists or religious revolutionaries had no choice but to incorporate the precept into Islamist ideology. In order to demonstrate originality, Islamist ideology sometimes pursued a more aggressive or bold approach to shared values, enemies, or causes with Marxism.

In a televised morning show with a group of “artists” in August 1991—two years into Khamenei’s new post as Supreme Leader—he praised the Russian writers Mikhail Sholokhov and Aleksey Tolstoy for their contributions to preserving the Communist Revolution:

When I compare the Russian October revolution with our own Islamic Revolution, I can’t help but notice that the Russian revolution has been far more brutal and violent. Yet even that

brutal Russian revolution and subsequent political upheavals attracted a lot of skilled and popular...writers such as Sholokhov and Aleksey Tolstoy...I am personally very interested and intrigued by Tolstoy and his work. He initially opposed the Bolsheviks and joined the White movement. When the White movement was finally defeated in 1919, he went into exile to France and then Germany from 1917 to 1923. Then in 1923, he returned to Russia and joined the revolution by publishing his masterpiece about the events of the October revolution, titled *The Ordeal* [trilogy]. Although I have read a lot of books about the October revolution, *The Ordeal* definitely stands out. Now, bear in mind, this book is written by a person who was initially anti-revolutionary, he wrote such a masterpiece in praise of the Socialist Revolution. I have read a lot of books about the Russian Socialist Revolution, but only two of them are world-class masterpieces written by two world-class writers: *The Ordeal* trilogy by Aleksey Tolstoy and *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov.

Khamenei then pointed his finger at the group of “artists” and said, “Sholokhov is a character very much like you gentleman. He was a phenomenon born out of the revolution. He is from the revolutionary class. The revolution takes place when Sholokhov is still a young writer, and he wrote *And Quiet Flows the Don* based on his experiences and pivotal moments during the revolution. Yet I prefer *The Ordeal* because Tolstoy [depicted] a very positive and humane face of the revolution, unlike *And Quiet Flows the Don*, which is very realistic and sometimes even violent.” Khamenei is fascinated with Tolstoy, according to his speeches and memoirs, because Tolstoy went through a conversion and repented.

During a September 1993 meeting with Basij militia students, Khamenei talked about his favorite American writers and why he favors them. He argued that every political system has a level of censorship and therefore that crossing redlines has consequences in systems across the world. “[In the Islamic Republic],” he detailed, “there are redlines that nobody is allowed

to cross. Not that it is unique to us, but there are redlines you cannot cross everywhere in this world, not even in the so-called democratic systems. There was a time when the communists and socialists were actively engaged in the dialogue in American society. They were stopped. Reading novels and articles by the likes of Howard Fast and John Steinbeck, one is shocked to learn what the [U.S. government] has done to the communists and socialists in the United States to stop them in their tracks. Read Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to learn about the extent of awful things the 'leaders of the free world' have done to their own populace once they crossed the redlines."

Never mind that Khamenei omits any evidence that the likes of Steinbeck and Fast were "mistreated" by the U.S. government for "[crossing] redlines." Steinbeck is a Nobel laureate whose novels were adapted by the movie industry. Fast was hired by the U.S. government multiple times during and after World War II, and he wrote regularly for Voice of America. Yet Khamenei continues: "Do you think if a political group or an individual in the U.S. hypothetically says they want to dismantle the U.S. or they want to secede from the U.S. or if they say give back some of the land that the White people confiscated from the indigenous tribes in America, the U.S. government is going to tolerate them? Or will they do to them the same thing they did to David Koresh and his followers in Waco, Texas?"

Mehdi Akhavan-Sales was one of his generation's greatest poets in the Iranian Nimai tradition, as well as a master in traditional poetry like qasida and ghazal. In traditional poetry, Akhavan was close to the Mashhad-centered Khorasan school. He was a magnificent bridge from classical to modern poetry. Akhavan's circle was among the most learned in Persian literature, composing in Khorasanian and modern forms. Khamenei was a great fan of Akhavan and his circle. As president, he made serious efforts to gather literati in an association to serve regime interests. Most famous writers and poets were leftists who turned against the Islamic Republic. Akhavan was neither a leftist nor a member of any group or political faction. He was, rather, a free spirit. Once, when Khamenei asked him to join the poetry nights in the presidential palace, Akhavan evidently refused, upsetting the president. At his Friday prayer sermon, the president said, "You are either with us or against us." Such an address to Akhavan in particular, and to

poets, writers, and artists in general, was understood as a declaration of war against uncommitted cultural producers.

Had Khamenei not been forced by his father to become a cleric in his early years, he might well have become a professional poet or literary scholar. He inherited his love of Persian poetry not from his family but from his birthplace. He has never lost his passion for words, poetic meter, or Persian music, whether as a humble member of the clergy or as president or Supreme Leader of a nation. Before the revolution, one of his greatest joys was to attend literary gatherings and, after his political ascension, to hold poetry nights in his office.

Khamenei's literary endeavors and adulation of Persian literature are quite rare among clerics, notwithstanding Khomeini's own literary pursuits. The Islamic Republic's founding leader, as a young seminarian, became interested in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, for which he showed more enthusiasm than for Islamic jurisprudence. But historically speaking, seminary curricula were centered on jurisprudence, and the objective was to educate clerics to become ayatollahs, or figures intellectually capable of understanding the sacred texts on their own and eligible to issue a fatwa. It is mastery of jurisprudence that brings social prestige and enables a cleric to run a religious financial network. Traditionally, philosophy, even in its Islamic version, was seen by religious authorities as a kind of science with roots in pagan Greece, imported by the "devious" eighth- and ninth-century caliph Harun al-Rashid to distort Islam and distract people's attention from Shia imams' teachings. Therefore, the study of Islamic philosophy and mysticism was a marginal and mostly covert activity in the clerical centers, providing neither social status nor clerical credentials. Those who taught these subjects mostly lived in isolation and extreme poverty.

The dynamic between Mashhad and Qom deserves a brief reprise here: the Mashhad seminary was smaller, older, characterized by a contented intimacy among insiders, but less open to newcomers; Qom, very open to outsiders, would become the largest seminary in Iran. Mashhad clerics also harbored a strong anti-philosophical tendency, a penchant dating to Mirza Mehdi Isfahani's arrival there from Najaf in the 1920s. True knowledge, he averred, should come from the Prophet and religious saints and imams;

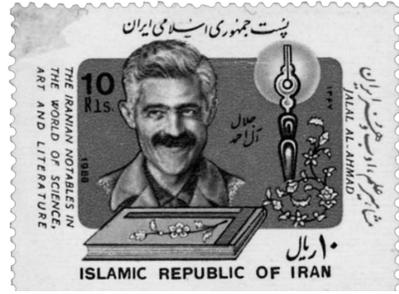
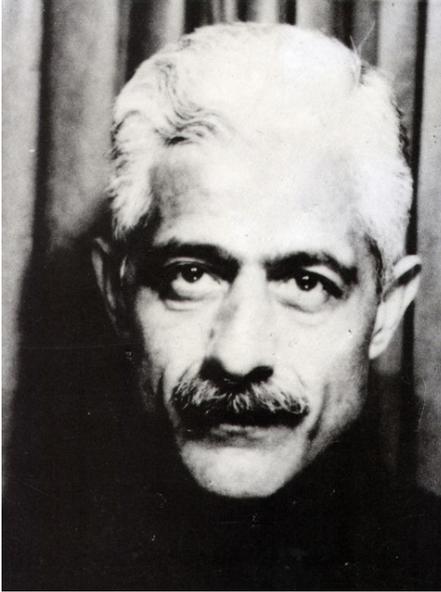
seeking knowledge from Plato, Aristotle, and their Muslim heirs, by contrast, would be heretical.

Studying philosophy or mysticism was not especially common in any Islamic seminary, but Mashhad clerics viewed the endeavor with great hostility. For instance, in Qom, Muhammad Hossein Tabatabai taught philosophical texts publicly until Ayatollah Hossein Boroujerdi, head of the Shia community and seminary, ordered him to cease doing so. It is common knowledge that Boroujerdi was under pressure not only from the Qom clergy but also from the Mashhad clergy, who regarded philosophy as pure paganism. However, Tabatabai received Boroujerdi's tacit approval to teach philosophy at home, in private, to a small number of his students. Had he been in Mashhad, it would have been quite inconceivable for him and his students to enjoy this right.

This helps explain Khamenei's poor education in philosophy and mysticism. His attitude toward Islamic philosophy changed after the revolution for two reasons. In an open letter to clergy, Khomeini complained about the anti-philosophical environment before the revolution and bitterly recalled the attitude of those who blamed him for his preoccupation with philosophy and accused him of blasphemy. Khomeini lashed out at anti-philosophical clerics, tarring them as "retarded" and "petrified minds." Second, Islamic philosophy, as a theoretical apparatus, had been seen as a political tool in competition with modern ideologies, especially Marxism. Given the intellectual poverty of Islamic theology and irrelevance of jurisprudence, Islamic philosophy was regarded as more useful for reacting to the atheist foundation of Marxism and a secular Western worldview. Even though Iranian Marxists and other adherents of Western ideologies were defeated through government force and a cultural purge, Islamic philosophy has remained the government's official philosophy. While Islamic philosophy may seem anachronistic, the government has invested in it massively through its institutionalization inside and outside the seminary and academia.

Interestingly, Khamenei expressed little about philosophy in his speeches or decisions as president. Only when he became Supreme Leader did he intuit that Islamic philosophy was indispensable to maintaining the regime's ideological apparatus. Five years after he assumed office, he ordered the

creation of the Sadra Islamic Theosophy Foundation, run by his older brother, Muhammad, also a cleric, who was swiftly promoted to “ayatollah” status by state media so that he could be portrayed as a possible successor. The only difference between the brothers, one might say, is that Muhammad holds a university degree and Ali does not. Philosophy did not occupy a significant place in either brother’s education.



Stamp honoring Jalal al-e Ahmad, 1988

Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923–69) was an influential Iranian writer who originally espoused communism but later found common cause with Islamists against the modernization regime carried out by the shah.

4

Political Life Before the Revolution

When Ali Khamenei was born in Mashhad in April 1939, the holy Iranian city was unprepared for the outbreak of World War II. Turbulence was roiling Iran from within and without. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ended the Qajar Dynasty in 1925 by replacing Ahmad Shah and founding the monarchy in his family's name, enjoyed massive support from various strata, including clergy who were concerned a republic might be established in the wake of Qajar's collapse.

For clerics, the word *republic* ominously called to mind Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular agenda in Turkey, which constrained the social authority of religious figures and public expressions of religion. Given the clergy's ability to mobilize people against the idea of a republic, Reza Shah walked back his initial plan by proclaiming a new dynasty. Although he maintained the existing political system, he revolutionized its contents by forming a modern state, educational and judicial institutions, and urban development plans. His failure to declare a republic as Atatürk had in Turkey did not impede his similar motivation to break dramatically from tradition. Reza Shah associated modernity with "nationalism" and "anti-clericalism." His policies also instituted a new form of state oppression over civil society and restrictions on political freedom. Reza Shah rapidly lost the clergy's support and gradually antagonized secular intellectuals. When World War II began, the shah was watching his social power base steadily erode.

The main Shia institution in Iran, the Qom seminary, and all its modern political discourses are products of the Pahlavi period. It is ironic that Reza Shah, who began his modernization agenda by enforcing secularism, unknowingly modernized the seminary and paved the way for the politicization of Shia institutions. Modern messianism in contemporary Iran could

not have occurred without Reza Shah's modernization and secularization policies. The Islamic Revolution and the empowerment of clerics advanced in a sophisticated process that emerged from clerical access to modern technology and economic mechanisms. Two opposing iterations of Shiism, militant and messianic, have their roots in the Pahlavi-era political, economic, and social scene. Since then, messianism and other religious concepts have been transformed into modern ideologies heavily influenced by the religious and secular ideologies of the time.

In twentieth-century Iran, messianism emerged as a reaction to the political, social, and cultural developments of the time. After the conflicts and controversies that preceded the constitutional movement and the clerical role in politics, Reza Shah began planning his broad reforms. One of his fundamental goals was to consolidate the power of the central government and to end communalism. To do this, he needed to redefine the geopolitical borders of Iran and reduce the influence of so-called foreigners. Since most high-ranking clerics in Najaf were originally Iranians and considered themselves Shia leaders with the right to intervene in affairs in the world's "only" Shia country, Iran, they directly influenced political events in the Qajar period.

To minimize the influence of foreigners, Reza Shah became interested in transferring the center of religious authority from Najaf to a city in Iran. Many clerics in Iran, to boost their stature, also wanted an Iranian center of Shia learning that could vie with Najaf. Reza Shah's reform agenda required secularizing the political structure, the administration, and the bureaucracy. He wanted to announce the end of the monarchy and become the first president of the republic, but in this he failed. Therefore, he became the first secular king of Iran—a kind of paradox. The clerical establishment and the monarchy have endured as political institutions in Iranian society since ancient times. The kings and clerics were connected to the same source of divine legitimacy.

Abdul Karim Haeri Yazdi, the founder of the Qom seminary, understood the political requirements of his time and established the seminary at the cost of depoliticizing it. Haeri Yazdi, in the words of a contemporary cleric, "does not introduce himself into political concerns and governmental

matters since he believes that in these times avoidance of such things is far preferable for someone like himself.” Clerics who had gained political and social authority since the Safavid period, which encompassed Iran’s first powerful Shia governments, started to lose their political power base during the Pahlavi period. Because Reza Shah cut the clerics out of the country’s educational and judicial systems, the theory of the representation of the imam encountered a serious crisis. Since the Safavid period, Shia clerics had supported the theory that granted a Shia jurist (an expert in sharia) almost the same authority as an imam, capable of conferring religious legitimacy to the sultan’s power. But the secular platform of Reza Shah’s political reform reduced the role of clerics in the public sphere.

The change to an apolitical clerical establishment had varying effects on Reza Shah’s government. On the one hand, it reduced the risk of interference by clerics in politics, while on the other, it threatened the very legitimacy of his kingdom. Failing to oppose the government at that time has been interpreted as “political aloofness” by clerics. But this view obscures the different political roles clerics played. While Reza Shah’s secular agenda attacked clerical authority, he also felt he needed clerics’ support to safeguard his legitimacy. The clerics were incapable of opposing the shah because they lacked sufficient social power or financial resources. They therefore experienced a difficult dilemma. But clerics also had common interests with the shah, including that of fending off Marxist opposition. Emphasizing the Shia nature of the Iranian government could have helped Reza Shah create a powerful central government and a clerical establishment that still relinquished much of its social power.

The Pahlavi dynasty effectively pretended to be a Shia government because it was not powerful enough alone and needed to attract clerical support. The clerics supported that inclination because it was the only way to allow a less acrimonious relationship with the government. The political attitudes of many Shia clerics began to change in the decades before the 1979 revolution. During that time, Marxist ideology was increasingly influential among intellectuals and hence became a major political threat to the government, as well as to Islam. In order to fight the influence of Marxism, many clerics sought to steel themselves by reading the works of Iranian

Marxists such as Taqi Arani and Ehsan Tabari. But as a result, Marxism actually influenced many clerics and Islamic writers.

It was against this backdrop that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rose through the ranks. What makes Khamenei unique is his political experience. He spent more of his life in politics than in the seminary, having been involved in the former starting at age twenty-four. Khamenei says that the 1951 speech by Navvab Safavi, the leader of the Organization of Islamic Society (*Fedayin-e Islam*), about the implementation of sharia and the “deceits of the shah and Britons,” motivated him to become politically active. Navvab himself was influenced by Qutb, the Islamist scholar and leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and their first meeting occurred in 1953, when the Egyptian received Safavi. The two men reportedly had good relations and stayed together through Safavi’s time in Egypt, with Qutb himself coordinating the visit. Khamenei commented that the sojourn had a significant impact on the Muslim Brotherhood, adding that “Safavi had a symbolic and charismatic personality, influential in revolutionary action, and his movement was an early warning of Ruhollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution.”

Perhaps through Fedayin-e Islam militants, Ali Khamenei was introduced to Muslim Brotherhood ideology. In Khamenei’s memoir covering his early days of political activism all the way to his ascent to the presidency, he explains his fixation on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sayyid Qutb’s teachings, and the formation of his fundamentalist ideology: “I was arrested again by SAVAK in April 1967...during that time, the ‘June disaster’ took place and the humiliating Six Day War wounded the hearts of the faithful Muslims. What hurt our feelings beyond that was the glee of the Pahlavi sympathizers and the establishment.”

From the very beginning of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei became one of its major figures and a close ally of Ruhollah Khomeini. Khamenei cofounded the Islamic Republic Party and served as deputy minister of defense, acting commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guard, the Supreme Leader’s representative in the Supreme Council of Defense, a member of the Majlis, head of the Council of Cultural Revolution, head of the Expediency Council of the regime, head of the Council for Revision of the Constitution, and then, of course, president and Supreme Leader. One can say that, among

politicians and clerics of the Islamic Republic, no one has such vast political and military experience.

Since he came to power, Khamenei has traveled to Mashhad every Nowruz (the beginning of spring in the Iranian calendar) and made a public speech at the Imam Reza Shrine. Iranians usually hear stern speeches from the Supreme Leader, but his supporters say that when he is in Mashhad, he benefits from the grace of the imam and becomes more courageous and determined. Critics of the regime believe that when he is in his hometown, he tries to satisfy his traditional and conservative supporters. Mashhad is dominated by the Holy Precinct, which is “not only Iran’s most sacred religious site but also by some reckoning the Islamic Republic’s biggest and richest business empire.” The Imam Reza Shrine, which is far bigger than Vatican City, is not accountable to the government and its exports and imports are not subject to taxation. Some economic experts estimate that the annual budget of the Holy Precinct is about \$2 billion. Iran’s leaders have long appointed the custodian of the Holy Precinct—the shah before the revolution and the Supreme Leader since. Due to the special economic nature of the Holy Precinct and its exclusive accountability to the Supreme Leader, it has become the place for secret economic activities. For example, according to some intelligence reports, the Holy Precinct is one of the Iranian foundations that financially supports Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Khamenei had a close relationship with Abbas Vaez Tabasi, who died in 2016 and served as custodian of the Holy Precinct from 1979 until his death. After coming to power in 1989, Khamenei converted Tabasi’s position from a temporary post to a permanent one. Tabasi, born three years before Khamenei, was also raised in Mashhad and studied there. According to his website biography, Tabasi, like Khamenei, started his political activity following Navvab Safavi’s 1951 speech in Mashhad. The lifetime friendship between the two dated to the 1960s, when the clerics used their sermons as a tool to mobilize people against the shah. Although the Mashhad seminary then consisted overwhelmingly of nonpolitical clerics, Khamenei and Tabasi led a minor political circle of the clerical establishment.

Tabasi, an IRGC founder in Khorasan province, was considered an influential figure inside the military. Sardar Gholam Reza Naqdi, one of the

hardline commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, was once his bodyguard. Tabasi was the representative of the Supreme Leader in Khorasan and a member of the Assembly of Experts starting in 1979, and in 1996 Khamenei appointed him to the Expediency Council. Given that the Holy Precinct is the richest organization in Iran and under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader, the Imam Reza Shrine has been a powerful center in the political developments of the past two decades. This organization had an especially important role in empowering Khamenei when he took office, considering he was then a mid-ranking cleric not able to collect religious taxes. There is nothing in the Islamic Republic's constitution that mentions the financial resources of the Supreme Leader. Therefore, foundations and organizations, which are out of government reach—and above all the Holy Precinct—have helped Khamenei entrench his power both financially and logistically.

Accordingly, Tabasi, as a major financial provider to the Supreme Leader, was one of the most influential clerics in Iran. Tabasi expressed his full faith in the Supreme Leader and recognized his right to dissolve parliament, a right not expressed in the constitution. Many in Iran's political circles believed that Tabasi was the hidden hand behind Khamenei's actions. According to some reports, in the Assembly of Experts meeting after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Tabasi led a group of members to vote for Khamenei as Supreme Leader against those who wanted to form a leadership council rather than have a single successor. The influence of the Holy Precinct over Khamenei raises the question of how much he shares the views of some of the Mashhad-based extremists discussed earlier, especially given his demonstrated sympathy for some of their superstitious practices.

The Islamic Revolution does not find revolutionary passion and sociopolitical order to be at odds, but rather defends the theory of the revolutionary regime “until the end of time.” The “new time” that the Islamic Revolution is meant to create, according to Khamenei, involves the revival and global domination of “Islamic civilization,” as described by Qutb in his book *The Future Belongs to Islam*. In this way of thinking, the revival and spread of Islamic civilization is a divine promise that needed the revolution and the Islamic Republic to become manifest. In turn, building an Islamic civilization is the ultimate revolutionary goal of the Islamic Republic. “Islamic

civilization: this is the objective of Islamic Republic of Iran,” Khamenei has written. “Achieving such civilization will be possible only after the final jihad.”

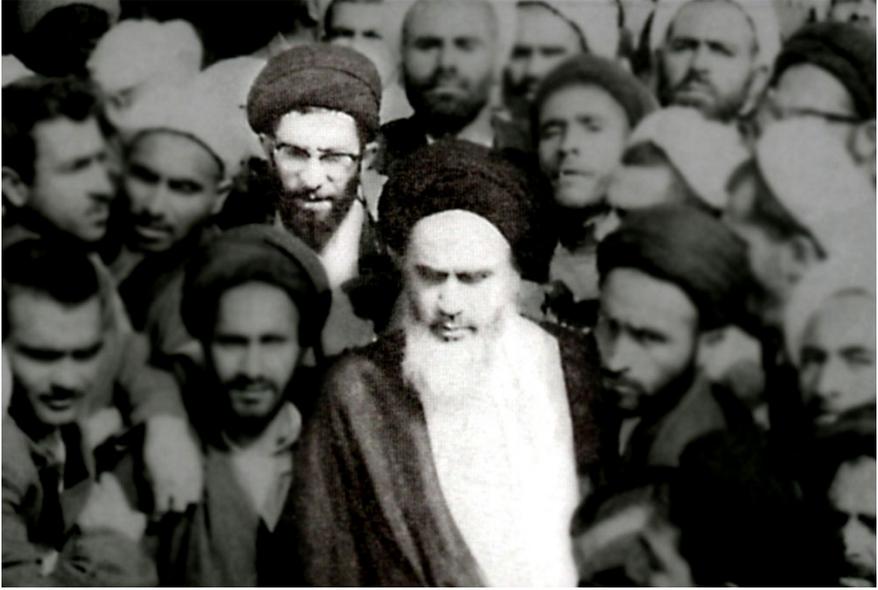
Khomeini did advocate the “export of the revolution,” enjoining Muslims to overthrow their pro-Western governments and encouraging them to fight to annihilate Israel. But legitimizing “offensive jihad,” as promoted under Khamenei, justifies any kind of intervention wherever possible around the world in support of the revolution: it is a perfect premise for legitimizing Iran’s imperialism, which flows directly from the regime’s “pan-Islamic” revolutionary ideology and its totalitarian nature. In this sense, Iranian imperialism is different from nineteenth-century European imperialism, which was principally national and territorial.

By 1977, the political unrest that had fermented for decades within the seminaries of Mashhad and Qom spilled into the streets of Tehran. Demonstrations, strikes, and other acts of civil resistance against the rule of Muhammad Reza Shah intensified over the next two years, culminating with the shah’s departure in January 1979. Khomeini, whom the shah had banished from Iran in the 1960s for provocative preaching and revolutionary activity, returned in February at the invitation of the temporary opposition-based government. Greeted by an impassioned crowd of millions who had gathered in Tehran, Khomeini officially came to power shortly thereafter through a combination of street fighting by rebel forces, a national referendum establishing Iran as an Islamic Republic, and the approval in December 1979 of a new constitution by which Khomeini was officially installed as Supreme Leader.

In November of that tumultuous year, when pro-Khomeini students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Ali Khamenei was reportedly in Saudi Arabia on the Hajj pilgrimage with revolutionary figure and future Islamic Republic president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani claimed the two were taken aback by this sudden, student-led action, stating, “It was not our policy.” But if news of the U.S. embassy takeover made Khamenei himself uncomfortable, he opted not to oppose the ayatollah publicly and thereby risk his political future. In fact, Khamenei would become a close ally of the Islamic Republic’s founding leader in the early days of the revolution. His ties

to the inner circle of revolutionary leaders were advanced by his relations with the pro-Khomeini clerics of Mashhad and Qom, especially Rafsanjani. Indeed, it was at Rafsanjani's suggestion that Khomeini, despite knowing little about the younger cleric beyond their teacher-student relationship in Qom, chose Khamenei to be a member of the Revolutionary Council, the most powerful body in the nascent regime.

Shortly after the revolution, at Khomeini's request, Khamenei and four others also formed the Islamic Republic Party to assist in the establishment of Iran's new theocratic form of rule. Khamenei thereafter enjoyed a number of roles in the Islamic Republic's inaugural government.



Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor in the 1970s



Iranian students scale the U.S. embassy walls in Tehran, November 4, 1979.



Mohammad Reza Shah praying in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, beside Ardeshir Zahedi, Iran's ambassador to the United States, in the 1970s

5

Revolutionary Years and Presidency

It was while preparing to sleep on a Mecca rooftop that Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei learned of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by angry students calling themselves “Followers of the Imam’s Line.” Immediately, they returned to Tehran. Both men knew that such an incident could have a dramatic impact on the course of the Islamic Revolution, when the power of Khomeinist revolutionaries was not yet consolidated. But when the two arrived in Tehran, they discovered that Khomeini, who was previously unaware of the plan to attack the embassy, had endorsed the students’ initiative and labeled it “the second revolution” in order to show its significance.

During the Islamic Republic’s first decade, particularly after revolutionaries finished purging the previous leadership’s elements from the military and other institutions, great fissures divided the revolutionaries. The main rivalry was between religious revolutionaries—Islamists—and leftists. While traditional clergy sought to respond to the threat posed by Marxism by revitalizing their theological apparatus and strengthening their social network, Islamists had more difficulty. On one hand, Islamism as a modern ideology was born outside the traditional clerical establishment and seen as a rival. On the other, Islamism had to compete with strong leftist factions that had effective ideological arsenals to mobilize dissatisfied, uprooted social classes, belonging to a rapidly developing society, against the monarchy.

In the competition that followed, leftist Muslims sought to show that they were more sincerely anti-American—and effective—than the Marxists. “Followers of the Imam’s Line”—i.e., the Islamist leftist students—won the political battle on two fronts. They, in turn, defeated Muslim nationalists who were neither anti-American nor revolution-minded but were used by

Khomeini to facilitate the transition from the ancien régime to the new one. And they defeated other leftists who did not intend to be fully absorbed by Khomeini's camp.

Thus, the embassy seizure was driven mostly by a motivation to change the internal power equation, and had less to do with foreign policy as such. But pro-Khomeini Islamists did not win the competition through the power of their ideas or through intellectual debate. After the revolution, they prevailed in a three-year battle against their rivals by banning their parties, closing their newspapers, forcing them to leave the country, imprisoning their members, and executing hundreds of their high-ranking members and leaders. What ended the competition was not words but guns and prison keys.

But this was not the end of fissures in the newly established government. Islamists themselves started to divide into two camps: right-wing—those who were mostly connected to the “bazaar,” or traditional business class, whose members were also historically the main funders of the religious establishment and its institutions; and left-wing—who mostly belonged to the middle class created or reshaped by Pahlavi's modernization, and were connected to universities and had strong affinities with suppressed leftist groups. While Khamenei had an intellectually leftist tendency, he was close to the bazaar and opposed the left wing, as depicted here, especially on its economic agenda. The first decade of the Islamic Republic witnessed the climax of leftist Islamists' power. During Khamenei's presidency, leftist prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi held executive power while Khamenei was a figurehead. Although Khamenei disagreed with Mousavi regarding his leftist welfare-state agenda, as well as on other issues, he was unable to dismiss or constrain him. While speaking about creating a relationship with the United States was taboo, Khamenei privately warned of the ramifications of U.S.-Iran animosity for the future of the country. Being anti-American was only helping left-wing socialization of the economic structure, and weakening the bazaar's economic strength and its sociopolitical power base.

Iran's Revolution and the Confluence of Two Authorities

Ayatollah Khomeini transformed *marjaiya* (marja status—i.e., source of emulation; a Shia cleric who has reached the rank of grand ayatollah) from a religious position possessing an ambiguous relationship with political authority to a religious position with explicit political connotations and implications. According to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader must be not only a *mujtahid* but also a *marja*. Conditioning leadership on marjaiya was the main attempt to unify top religious authority with top political authority in post-revolutionary Iran. Again according to the constitution, “the belief in the imamate and constant leadership and its fundamental role in the continuity of the Islamic Revolution” is one of the components of the Islamic Republic. Also, “all civil, penal, financial, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations. The Guardian Council’s jurists are judges in this matter.”

Making Islamic criteria a basis for all types of laws does not make sense without a government of Shia jurists, because they are the only people who have the social right to give official interpretations of Islam. In this regard, the Islamization of the government directly leads to clericalization of the political system. Khomeini has elaborated the theory of *velayat-e faqih*, which is rooted in sharia foundations and religious theories. In his formulation of the theory, the *veli-ye faqih* is the one who generally represents the Hidden Imam. Therefore, as the Hidden Imam’s representative, the *veli-ye faqih* has all the authorities, rights, and responsibilities that the Hidden Imam possesses. Khomeini held that the government (in its Shia sense) is an absolute authority that is handed over to the Prophet by Allah and that it is the most important order of Allah, which comes before all other divine secondary orders (sharia). The authority of the jurist-ruler is not limited by sharia; if it were, handing over the authority to the Prophet would be senseless.

The office of president, according to Iran’s 1979 constitution, is filled by the popular election of candidates pre-approved by the regime’s Guardian

Council, while the position itself is subordinate to the Supreme Leader. The first elected president of the Islamic Republic remained in office little more than a year. Abolhassan Bani Sadr, an economist with little religious training, won the January 1980 Iranian presidential election with a large majority, only to see his authority challenged by Khomeini. The ayatollah apparently expected Bani Sadr to work within a strictly limited scope and with a primary focus on facilitating the national agenda of the clerical establishment. But after a tension-filled year and some months, Khomeini, dissatisfied with the new president's performance, dismissed Bani Sadr, who later fled the country.

The subsequent presidential election brought a revolutionary affiliated with Khomeini to office, Muhammad Ali Rajai. But Rajai would meet an even bleaker fate than his predecessor. Just a few months into his tenure, anti-regime forces placed a bomb in the office of the Iranian prime minister, where Rajai was present. He perished, along with the prime minister. Rajai's assassination opened a door of opportunity for Khamenei, who became the republic's first cleric-president. He won the October 1981 election by a landslide, showing himself to be the most popular among four approved candidates. Remarkably, just months before assuming the presidency, Khamenei survived his own assassination attempt by counterrevolutionary forces. While he was speaking at a mosque during Saturday prayers, a tape recorder placed on the podium exploded, causing serious injury to the cleric's lungs and vocal cords, and permanently paralyzing his right hand. Over eight years, Khamenei fared little better than Bani Sadr in terms of effective leadership. His authority was often challenged by stronger figures in the regime, primarily Mir Hossein Mousavi, who played a dominant executive role as prime minister.

When Khomeini died in 1989, Western media described his successor as a moderate figure who might open the doors of the country to the West. Yet Khamenei, then fifty years old, was neither a powerful politician nor someone who possessed advanced religious credentials. His appointment to the position of Supreme Leader occurred because no one expected to find a charismatic leader similar to the Islamic Republic's founding father. Because leftists presumably could weaken Khamenei by portraying him as

a pro-American right-winger, unfit to succeed the century's most outspoken anti-American Muslim leader and therefore unfit to protect the revolution's heritage, he swiftly reversed course, becoming so virulently anti-American that he developed into the loudest such voice in Iranian politics.

Because domestic politics in Iran are dynamic, and communism was declining globally, marginalized leftists started to revise their ideology and political attitudes. Powerless leftists became reformists and revisionists who advocated detente with the West and attempted to break the taboo of relations with the United States. While many of the same students who climbed U.S. embassy walls began to write about liberal democratic values such as tolerance, pluralism, civil society, and freedom of expression, the hard core of the regime remained anti-American. As president, Ali Khamenei was not happy with Khomeini's fatwa against the author Salman Rushdie, and even tried to undo it, but received a public tongue-lashing from Khomeini in retaliation.

Furthermore, when the leftist prime minister wanted the support of the ruling jurist to issue an executive order to enforce tough regulations on employers, Khamenei opposed this leftist approach. In a public speech, he said the authority of the ruling jurist is not unlimited. Immediately, Khomeini denounced his weak understanding of *velayat-e faqih*. Khamenei's position changed, however, when he became Supreme Leader himself. Ironically, upon his ascension, not only did he endorse the fatwa but he also advocated the idea of the absolute authority of the ruling jurist (now himself). He became the country's loudest anti-American voice and the word *enemy*, meaning the United States, became the most frequent term in his personal lexicon. For Khamenei as Supreme Leader, anti-Americanism is something that transcends ideology. His true beliefs are secondary in importance to those which make him powerful. Anti-Americanism is one of the main components of his political identity. Abandoning anti-Americanism would mean not only abandoning animosity toward the United States but, more important, legitimizing domestic opponents in a battle that began in 1989. The Islamic Republic could potentially normalize relations with the United States, somewhat like China did, but probably not under Khamenei.

In August 1989, the presidential elections and the referendum for the

revised constitution took place simultaneously after Khamenei had taken over. The revised constitution did not require the Supreme Leader to be a marja and it greatly expanded his authorities. According to the constitution and Islamic criteria, certain political and judicial positions must be held by a mujtahid. This includes the judiciary chief, the six members of the Guardian Council, the minister of intelligence, and members of the Assembly of Experts, among others. Standing above them, the Supreme Leader must be, at the very least, a mujtahid. Khamenei's clerical rank before he assumed the leadership was *hojatoleslam* (proof of Islam), a midlevel title indicating lack of *ijtehad*. On the same night he was appointed Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts, state radio and television referred to him for the first time as an ayatollah. Such a term has the explicit connotation of status as a mujtahid.

Obviously, this title change was striking for clerics, especially the nonextremist ones. At that moment, the controversy began over Khamenei's degree of religious knowledge. Rumors spread in clerical circles that Khamenei was trying to convince some mujtahids to issue him a certificate of *ijtehad*. Many mujtahids in Qom believed that Khamenei had not sufficiently studied the religious sciences to be eligible for such a certificate. Khamenei's assistants went to Qom to encourage them to recognize the Supreme Leader as a mujtahid. Their attempts to convince Muhammad Reza Golpayegani, a senior marja in Qom, failed. Golpayegani said he knew nothing of Khamenei's educational level. Through threats and coaxing, they were able to convince only a few mujtahids in Qom to issue a certificate of *ijtehad* for the leader. Those mujtahids did so not because they were convinced of Khamenei's *ijtehad*, but because the petitioners justified the matter of *ijtehad* with political reasons—if Khamenei did not get the certificate, then the reputation of the only Shia government in the world would be at risk.

Golpayegani's refusal to issue the certificate to Khamenei was significant. Although it did not indicate that Khamenei is not a mujtahid and has no constitutional right to rule, it did mean that Khamenei did not have the religious right to give orders regarding issues that require the decision of a mujtahid. Furthermore, it was a sign that Golpayegani believed he was the right person to issue orders regarding some governmental matters, which

would clearly constitute interference by a marja in government, something Iranian leaders did not necessarily want. Khamenei was trying to consolidate all power in himself. A cautious campaign began against Golpayegani, the marja who prayed over Ayatollah Khomeini's body. The prayer for the dead is significant, and this prayer was supposed to signal that the next supreme marja—to be confirmed by the government—would be Golpayegani. But as a result of the questionable nature of Khamenei's *ijtihad*, Golpayegani fell out of favor.

Muhammad Ali Araki was a respected twentieth-century mujtahid from the first generation of the Qom seminary and a disciple of Sheikh Abdul Karim Haeri Yazdi, the seminary's founder. He was in his mid-nineties when Khomeini died. He was not a marja, he had not written a book of sharia codes, and he was completely unknown to the public. Also, he suffered from many age-related illnesses and struggled to hear or speak. Politically, he was known for his ignorance about political affairs. Khamenei chose Araki to be Khomeini's successor as marja because he was near death, so he could not create long-term problems; because he was apolitical, unambitious, and unable to interfere in political issues; and because he owed his marja status to the new Supreme Leader. Araki could be used as Khamenei's tool. Furthermore, Araki was one of the few mujtahids at the time who believed in the legality of following a dead mujtahid; having been a follower of Khomeini while he was alive, Araki had no problem continuing to follow him after his death. That belief allowed all the governmental regulations following Khomeini's edicts to remain relatively untouched, helping to keep mujtahids like Golpayegani from protesting against the illegitimacy of government decisions in the absence of a mujtahid atop the political order.

Khamenei mobilized his institutions in Qom, notably the Office for Islamic Propaganda (*Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami*), to establish Araki's marjaiya. They built an office for him, compiled a book of sharia codes in his name, and started to campaign for him in the media. Golpayegani and other mujtahids and clerics who did not support the revolution were angry but could not speak out, because Araki was highly respected for his religious morality and they were under pressure from security forces to keep silent.

Nevertheless, the controversy over Khamenei's *ijtihad* did not stop.

Nobody could really be convinced that Khamenei was a mujtahid except low-ranking pro-revolutionary clerics. High-ranking clerics who were skeptical about his ijtehad gradually divided into many factions, particularly after the death of senior marjas Abu al-Qasem Khoei in Najaf and Muhammad Reza Golpayegani, Shahab al-Din Marashi Najafi, and Muhammad Ali Araki in Qom. When Araki died in December 1994, the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers (*Jame-ye Madrasin-e Howzeh Elmieh Qom*) issued a resolution emphasizing that only seven people were mujtahids eligible to be followed: Muhammad Fazel Lankarani, Muhammad Taqi Bahjat, Vahid Khorasani, Javad Tabrizi, Musa Shobeiri Zanjani, Nasser Makarem Shirazi—and Ali Khamenei. Araki's death was an important turning point that left room for the new generation of marjas.

After Khomeini's funeral, his successor appeared on state TV almost every night. He was shown receiving people every day, most of whom were demonstrating their allegiance to the new Supreme Leader. Everyone in our house was carefully watching him on our fourteen-inch black-and-white TV to see what the new ruling jurist would say to the nation. As the son of an ayatollah and a seminarian myself, I noticed after a few nights that Khamenei's appearance began to change. Watching with my father, we started to see him in new clothing and, eventually, a new haircut.

The ostensibly simple Shia clerical uniform has its own semiotics, and clothing can be regarded as an important expression of a cleric's mind and spirit. Shia liturgical dress mainly consists of three parts. The first is the *amamah* (scarf or turban), which exhibits geographical variations that signify religious credentials, economic class, and urban status. For instance, looking only at an amamah, I can tell you whether a cleric is Arab, Persian, or Turkish; whether he has a lower or higher rank; and whether he lives in a city or a village. The amamah comes in two colors, black and white. Black signifies that the cleric is a descendant of the Prophet, which is not only a matter of honor but also a status with legal ramifications. For example, a descendant of the Prophet can receive religious taxes. Therefore, it is forbidden for those who are not descendants of the Prophet to wear a black turban.

The second component of clerical dress is the *qaba*, a long, wide-sleeved gown reaching to the feet and buttoned in the center, under which one wears

white pants and a white collarless shirt. An alternative to the qaba is the *labbadeh*, with the main difference in the collar: the qaba's is much wider, the labbadeh's much tighter.

Labbadehs have become an expression of modernity, often chosen by those who have graduated from both seminary and university, or are at least familiar with Western cultures and social environments. By contrast, qabas generally reveal a more traditional and authentic mindset. Accordingly, most clerics inside the seminary favor the qaba. The third piece of a cleric's outfit is the *abaa*, or mantle, a long, full garment. Unlike the qaba or labbadeh, which can be almost any color, the abaa comes mostly in brown or black.

Khamenei was previously known as someone who favored the labbadeh, dating to the 1950s. He meant to distinguish himself from the traditional clergy, letting his hair grow under his turban, wearing shoes instead of *nalian* (sandals), and sporting a wristwatch, which was very unorthodox for clerics at that time. Therefore,

he was not recognized by traditional clergy as "one of them," and that was by design. But after the succession, the situation changed dramatically. Khamenei, needing to prove he was an ayatollah when he actually was not, altered his dress. After Khomeini's

*"The true mystery
of the world is the visible,
not the invisible."*

—Oscar Wilde

death, we watched Khamenei on television, and he swapped the labbadeh for a qaba. Then, he let his beard grow, removed his wristwatch, and cut his hair under his turban as short as possible to look like a typical grand ayatollah. But he was still reasonably young, at fifty, so he started whitening his beard in order to look older and more "spiritual."

A new wave of competition among various individuals claiming marjaiya status began just after Khomeini's death in 1989. In the list of Jame-ye Madrasin, many marjas were absent, including Yusuf Sanei, a disciple of Khomeini and former prosecutor, and Abdul Karim Mousavi Ardebili, the former head of the Supreme Court. Neither believed that Khamenei deserved the position. More significantly, two important mujtahids were excluded from the government's list: Montazeri and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani,

the successor to Abu al-Qasem Khoei in Najaf. Needless to say, Montazeri was left off because he had fallen out of favor with Khomeini and consequently with his successor. Sistani's absence from the list, which was issued by the seminary's top clerical echelon, proves that his social reputation was then weak enough that Khamenei and his team could pass him over as a marja.

Ironically, however, the ignored marjas, especially Montazeri and Sistani, gradually became the most followed marjas in Iran. Freezing out some marjas and introducing others, who cooperated with the government or at least were silent with regard to political issues (and particularly the Supreme Leader's political behavior), proved to be meaningful. The action was necessary to insert the Supreme Leader's name onto the list. Ali Khamenei's claim to marjaiya provoked a vast controversy. In October 1997, in his *fiqh* course, Montazeri openly criticized Khamenei's despotism, his overreliance on security forces, and his disrespect for the seminary. Then Montazeri loudly attacked Khamenei's claims of marjaiya and stated, "Mr. Khamenei? Why marjaiya? You are not at the level of marjaiya." Montazeri, who briefly mentored Khamenei in Qom before the revolution, claimed that Khamenei did not have sufficient religious knowledge and was academically incapable of issuing a fatwa. After his speech, as many as one thousand security personnel violently attacked Montazeri's home and office, beat his staff and students, confiscated his property, and damaged the buildings. Montazeri thus began several years under house arrest, isolated from the outside world except for his family.

The opposition to Khamenei's claim to marjaiya was not unobtrusive. After a few weeks, then president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in his sermon during Friday prayer, implicitly criticized Khamenei and said that the Supreme Leader "has no intention of being marja inside the country and his marjaiya is effective only for abroad," an astounding statement that Khamenei and his loyalists frowned upon. Yet it served to diminish the tension somewhat. After Khamenei became Supreme Leader, not only did semi-public criticism of his personal marjaiya or *ijtihad* begin, but criticism of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in the clerical and intellectual milieus strengthened. In his book *Theosophy and Government*, Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, son of Abdul Karim Haeri Yazdi, the founder of the Qom seminary and a disciple of Ruhollah

Khomeini, explicitly criticized and attempted to delegitimize the notion of authority of the Shia jurist.

In contrast, Abdulkarim Soroush, an Islamic philosopher, published his magnum opus, *The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge*, which generated a huge cultural debate. In this book, Soroush argued that the traditional methodology of understanding religious texts is no longer adequate and that modern interpretations should be applied in a modern paradigm. Consequently, the authority of the faqih that supposedly comes from his “sacred” knowledge became questionable. Dozens of books and articles have been published since the death of Ruhollah Khomeini that explicitly or implicitly, from a religious or a secular viewpoint, criticize any absolute power—including that of a jurist. Therefore, the theoretical legitimacy of velayat-e faqih is bound to lose strength as time goes on.

Khamenei not only failed to reconstruct the unity of the religious authority as created by Khomeini, but also unknowingly created many problems in the theory and practice of velayat-e faqih, ijtehad, and marjaiya. Unexpectedly, after a long period of tyranny under Saddam Hussein, the most powerful and followed marja in Iran emerged from Najaf, a city that was expected to be religiously barren for a long time, where no marja was expected to emerge after Khomeini. This and other challenges to his regime’s legitimacy propelled Khamenei to undertake future measures to strengthen and extend his religious authority and influence over clerics and their institutions.

Role in Military Affairs

Khamenei was also keen to be involved in military affairs. After the revolution, he occupied significant positions within the Revolutionary Guard as well as in the Ministry of Defense. And early in his tenure, he expressed hopes of reorganizing Iran’s regular military, which he characterized at the time as operating chaotically. But during the bloody eight-year conflict with Iraq, which spanned nearly the length of his presidency, his authority in military matters remained subordinate to that of other officials. Although he headed the Supreme Defense Council (later the Supreme National Security

Council, or SNSC), his influence there was minimal. And during the war itself, Rafsanjani, along with Prime Minister Mousavi and Khomeini confidant Montazeri, firmly gripped the reins of military-related power.

Yet Khamenei persisted in pushing for more than a passive role. Near the end of the war, he expressed to the Supreme Leader his belief that a single figure was needed to preside over the armed forces in all aspects, from military operations to administration. Khamenei may have expected to receive the appointment himself, but Rafsanjani had the greater credibility and influence within military echelons. Prompted by Khamenei's initiative, the Supreme Leader made Rafsanjani his own deputy representative to the armed forces, the de facto commander-in-chief of military affairs, until the end of the war. As leaders of the 1979 revolution carved out power for themselves within the new Islamic Republic and Khamenei struggled to establish his own authority, his positions on issues such as relations with the West began to diverge from those of ideological hardliners in the regime. He became increasingly argumentative, to the point of occasionally engaging in public disagreement with the Supreme Leader himself.

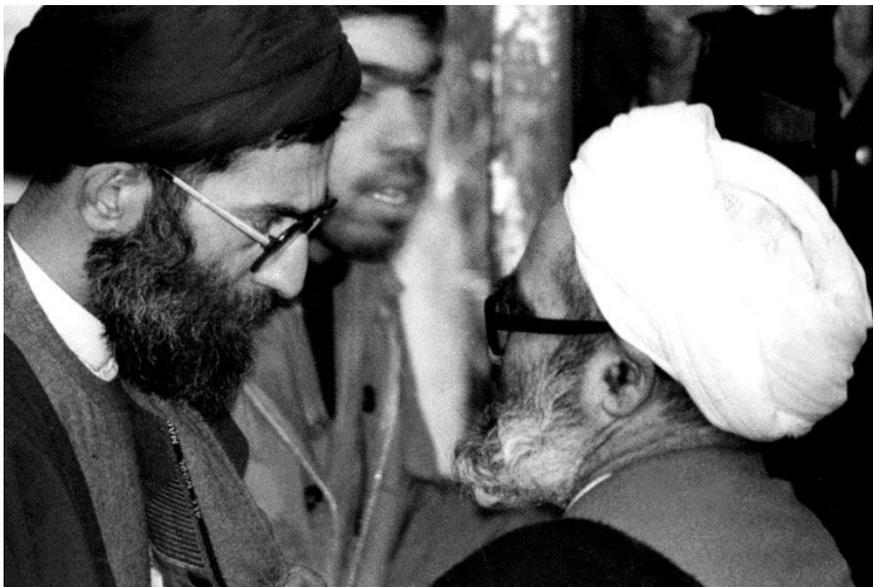
In one case, Khamenei defended members of a religious party that the Supreme Leader had strongly opposed as being anti-revolutionary, arguing that the faction consisted of some members who were in fact loyal to the leader and the Islamic regime. Nor did Khamenei shy away from disagreement with the leader over the theological underpinnings of the state. Once, in a Friday prayer sermon, Khamenei implied that the essential revolutionary principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which in effect confers absolute ruling power on Iran's Supreme Leader, is in fact limited by sharia. Khomeini reacted strongly to this consequential implication in an open letter, accusing Khamenei of misunderstanding the essential principle that the Supreme Leader's authority supersedes any law.

Despite such occasional open disagreements, Khamenei as president remained essentially in the good graces of the Supreme Leader. When the leader's health began to fail, Khamenei was one of a handful of trusted individuals to whom responsibility fell for running the affairs of state. Yet an incident that perhaps best summarizes the severely circumscribed nature of Khamenei's presidential authority occurred in 1988, toward the end of

his time in office. Beginning that July, regime elements began to execute thousands of Iranian political prisoners, representing a broad array of opposition factions, in a purge of what it perceived to be anti-revolutionary activity. Despite the scale of the killings and the likelihood that the orders came directly from the Supreme Leader's office, Khamenei was reportedly unaware of the massacre. Nevertheless, his time as president did serve to broaden his exposure to outside influences. As a young man, he had not traveled extensively outside Iran's borders—going no farther than the Shia centers of Iraq and later to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. But the obligations and privileges of the presidency would expand his horizons dramatically. His travel agenda during eight years in office included official visits to Zimbabwe, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Libya, Romania, and Yugoslavia. He even once briefly stopped over in the United States to participate in a UN General Assembly session in New York.



From right: Ruhollah Khomeini, judiciary head Abdul-Karim Mousavi Ardebili, and Ali Khamenei in the 1980s



Here, Khamenei meets with Hossein Ali Montazeri, a controversial cleric who was initially expected to succeed Khomeini as Supreme Leader.



Former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (left) is pictured here wearing a *qaba*, which is more formal and has a wider collar than the *labbadeh*, worn by then president Hassan Rouhani.

6

Supreme Leader

After Ayatollah Khomeini suffered a heart attack in 1989, he withdrew considerably from his practical duties. Although he retained the title of Supreme Leader, the running of state affairs largely devolved to three close advisors—his son Ahmad, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and, to a lesser extent, Ali Khamenei. As the Supreme Leader’s health continued to deteriorate, this leadership triumvirate and other officials began to prepare for the imminent reality of succession and to deliberate over potential candidates.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic, adopted in December 1979, stipulated that Iran’s Supreme Leader would be chosen from among those *marjas* (top Shia religious authorities) who had both a considerable following and some facility with statecraft. This posed a challenge: although most Iranian *marjas* expressed clear political opinions, they lacked experience in political affairs. Even more difficult was the task of identifying a *marja* who was loyal to the principles of the Islamic Revolution and also expressed unwavering support for the founding leader’s personal interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*. According to Khomeini’s exegesis of this principle, the Supreme Leader governs as Allah’s representative on Earth, and therefore is possessed with the “divine right” to absolute rule, both politically and judicially.

At the time, most prominent *marjas* rejected Khomeini’s new and unorthodox interpretation, holding instead to the more traditional view that Islamic governance must always be checked by sharia. And some of these traditionalists had already begun expressing concern that the new regime was not sufficiently aligning itself with Islam’s strictly prescribed body of governing statutes. Indeed, Khomeini’s official pronouncements on *velayat-e faqih* and *maslahat-e nezam* (the principle that actions taken to preserve the Islamic Republic supersede any other guiding principle, including sharia

and the constitution) enabled regime officials to resolve in their favor the inevitable conflicts that arose between sharia and the necessities of modern governance.

Khomeini openly denounced the traditionalists who opposed velayat-e faqih and maslahat-e nezam, and this simmering conflict, combined with a strong emphasis in the 1979 constitution on the mandatory Islamic character of the new regime, produced a very real fear among Khomeini loyalists: that traditionalist marjas, having religious legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian public, might seize power following the Supreme Leader's death, using that high office to throw out Khomeini's official interpretations of velayat-e faqih and maslahat-e nezam, and instead implement sharia at the expense of the regime's practical requirements.

To prevent this unpalatable outcome, Khomeini's advisors arranged for Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri to be named official successor to Supreme Leader, an appointment approved by the Assembly of Experts in November 1985. Montazeri was known to be a disciple of Khomeini who stood firmly with the principles of the Islamic Revolution and who would ostensibly block any traditionalist marja from claiming power. Not only did Montazeri publicly affirm the judicial principles expounded by the Supreme Leader by openly preaching velayat-e faqih, he published a four-volume study of the subject. In turn, Khomeini came to rely on Montazeri as a marja who could find Islamic solutions for judicial impasses with sharia. During the regime's first decade, when theological challenges arose in the complex process of conforming Iran's government bureaucracy to Islamic code, Montazeri was noted for exercising a pragmatic form of *ijtihad*, the ability to interpret Islamic texts.

Even as Montazeri both shared and propagated Khomeini's own interpretations of Islamic governing principles, he elaborated on velayat-e faqih in a more expansive manner than the Supreme Leader himself and advocated political agendas not aligned with those of the regime. As a result, from the first day of Montazeri's appointment as Khomeini's successor, friction arose between the ideological camps supporting the two leaders. By 1989, those serving Khomeini had determined that Montazeri's succession would jeopardize the long-term interests of the Islamic Republic, and Khomeini

dismissed him from his appointment in March of that year—just months before Khomeini's death. Thus did the attempt to publicly designate Khomeini's heir end in crisis for the regime. Not only was Montazeri the sole grand ayatollah in Iran whose pragmatic approach to sharia closely resembled Khomeini's, but he was also considered to be the greatest theoretician of *velayat-e faqih*, the theological pillar on which Khomeini's rule depended for legitimacy. Finding a replacement of similar theological and political stature would prove daunting for confidants of the Supreme Leader.

In the meantime, traditionalists continued to criticize the regime for its deficient compliance with Islamic law, decrying the idea that the state possessed authority to suspend sharia in any circumstance. In response, Khomeini proclaimed more boldly his contention that regime interests must always trump sharia. Such bitter theological quarrels, which intensified in the wake of Montazeri's dismissal, disillusioned many Iranians and planted seeds of doubt concerning the durability and longevity of their new theocracy. In April 1989, following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini ordered that the 1979 constitution, a product of Iran's Islamic Revolution, be revised, paving the way for the formal incorporation of *maslahat-e nezam* into the regime's enumerated powers. This proposed revision would vindicate Khomeini's long-held claim that the 1979 constitution did not adequately recognize the exhaustive sovereignty of the Supreme Leader. Accordingly, a key change would be the addition of "absolute" to the title of the Supreme Leader as "ruling jurist": *velayat-e faqih* would become *velayat-e motlaqeh-ye faqih*.

At least part of Khomeini's design in such changes was to create a barrier, impenetrable if possible, between the religious and political authorities that made up the Islamic Republic's governing structure. Of particular note was the sanction he proposed for the appointment of an ordinary ayatollah, or mujtahid, to the office of Supreme Leader, effectively eliminating the requirement that Khomeini's successor be a grand ayatollah, or *marja taqlid*, and thereby softening the religious certification required for Iran's highest political office. The new Supreme Leader, according to Khomeini's design, would be an overtly political figure, rather than a senior cleric.

Khomeini died in June 1989, before his proposed constitutional revisions

could be ratified legally by the vote of special council members and by a people's referendum. Therefore, technically, the succession rules of the 1979 constitution were still in force at his passing; Iran's Supreme Leader would have to possess the qualifications of a grand ayatollah. Yet regime leaders feared the mood of a public that was strained both by a long war and by the passing of an extremely charismatic leader. Khomeini's funeral in Tehran, which attracted millions and featured hysterical displays of emotion by some of the ayatollah's loyal followers, provided an object lesson. Those tasked with finding a successor reasoned that waiting for constitutionally specified mechanisms to play out could risk chaos. Upon Khomeini's death, an emergency session of the Assembly of Experts was therefore called by regime officials, with the express intent that this legislative body should ratify the selection of a new Supreme Leader without delay. At this moment of crisis, consensus would be required to achieve a strong vote of confidence in the individual upon whose shoulders would rest the daunting task of replacing the charismatic Khomeini. A distraught Iranian public needed reassurance that the regime would hold together in his absence. The regime's plan met with quick success: of the seventy-four assembly members who attended the emergency session, sixty, more than three-quarters, were persuaded to vote for Khamenei.

Why Khamenei?

Khamenei's swift election to the post, despite the swirling questions, served the purpose of maintaining stability. But it also caused bewilderment among the Iranian people and shocked the religious establishment. The strong—if whispered—belief among the clerical class was that Khamenei had never achieved the status of ayatollah, let alone grand ayatollah. In reality, no grand ayatollah in Iran had been identified as possessing a sufficiently convincing belief in *velayat-e faqih* and *maslahat-e nezam*, or a willingness to enforce and defend these ruling principles upon which Ruhollah Khomeini's vision of the Islamic Republic depended. Therefore, in the view of regime leaders, sticking to the dictates of the 1979 constitution by appointing a recognized

religious authority as Supreme Leader could spell disaster for the pragmatic requirements of a modern state.

Of course, there was the possibility that Khomeini's son Ahmad, who had been one of the ruling troika during the final decade of Khomeini's life, could step into the role. But if regime officials feared ceding power to those possessing too much religious authority, Ahmad was marked by the opposite limitation. Though politically ambitious, he lacked even minimal religious credentials to rule comfortably in the highest office of the Islamic Republic; he was a cleric, but achieved that status only at the behest of his father, and reportedly by investing minimal effort at seminary. Perhaps an equal consideration was the glaring hypocrisy of father-son succession in a country that had endured a revolution bent on abolishing a monarchy.

The most obvious choice for successor at the time was in fact Rafsanjani, the regime figure who had remained closest to Khomeini at the end. Rafsanjani was technically an ayatollah, if not a grand ayatollah, but more importantly he had enjoyed political authority and influence with Khomeini that went beyond official titles at any given time. Not only was he Khomeini's confidant, he was also known to be a smart politician and talented administrator. But all of these personal qualifications seemed to work against Rafsanjani. To other decisionmakers in Khomeini's ruling circle, Rafsanjani may have been regarded as beyond their influence, and therefore "too powerful" to become Supreme Leader. By contrast, Ali Khamenei was viewed by fellow revolutionary leaders simply as a respectable political figure. He had presented a good public face as president but had not achieved sufficient influence to bring a personal agenda to the job or to dominate other factions. Khamenei also possessed the advantage of relative youth, being just short of fifty at the time of Khomeini's death. Compared to other prominent revolutionary figures—including Khomeini himself, who had come to power when he was seventy-seven—Khamenei was in the prime of his political life.

Taking the Reins

And yet Khamenei began his reign as the second Supreme Leader of Iran at a distinct disadvantage. Although his appointment personified the founding leader's ambition to create a more distinct separation between religious and political authority, Khamenei remained, technically, a low-level cleric. His authority to rule on matters of Islamic law was openly questioned by religious leaders.

Recognizing this significant threat to his legitimacy, Khamenei knew he would need to shore up his weak religious bona fides. His first order of business would be to convince influential ayatollahs—especially those belonging to the Assembly of Experts—to officially designate him as “Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.” He hoped at least to nominally satisfy the expectation that Iran's Supreme Leader would be qualified to govern the Islamic Republic with adequate knowledge of religious issues. He sought and received help from Rafsanjani, who wielded considerable influence in the religious establishment.

Knowing that he would always be publicly perceived as falling short in the area of religious credentials, Khamenei also relied upon the almost limitless potential for aggrandizement of political power in the office of Supreme Leader. Of course, developing the office to its greatest potential would take time. And at the dawn of his rule, at least publicly, Khamenei presented an image of humility and a willingness to earn the allegiance of all Iranians. He stated the following before an audience largely composed of religious leaders on July 3, 1989, less than two months after assuming office:

What has happened with regard to the appointment of the [Supreme] Leader and putting the weight of this responsibility on the shoulders of this humble servant [of Allah] was not expected even for a second. If one thinks that I could have thought of taking this responsibility, whether during the period of fighting [against the shah] or in the course of the revolution or when I had executive responsibility [as president], then that person is wrong. I had always considered myself undeserving

not only of such a vital and important position, but even of much lower positions such as president and other responsibilities I had after the revolution. Once I told Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini] that sometimes my name was mentioned alongside others, even though I was not of their rank. I am a very ordinary and humble person. These are not polite, empty words. Even now I believe in this...Now I consider myself an ordinary seminarian without any specific advantage...Now that this weight is placed on my shoulders, I take it vigorously, as Allah urged his messengers, “So take it forcefully” [citing a Quranic verse in which Allah asks Moses to overcome his fears and carry out his responsibility as Allah’s messenger].

But Khamenei would grow more brazen as the months and years of his tenure unfolded. While at first retaining Khomeini holdovers in key regime positions, he gradually began replacing them with his own appointees. Then, he turned his strategic focus to constructing a massive bureaucratic support system under the rubric “Office of the Supreme Leader” in order to further consolidate his authority and check the supplemental powers granted to the presidency by Iran’s 1989 constitutional amendments. Those amendments eliminated the position of prime minister and expanded the portfolio of the president, a seat occupied at the outset of Khamenei’s tenure by Rafsanjani. As Khamenei’s sweeping new bureaucratic machinery formed and continually expanded, it would ultimately give him personal influence over Iran’s foreign and domestic policy and the ability to install his own appointees across the broad range of Iranian ruling institutions, independent of outside constraints. Indeed, Khamenei’s vision for building the Office of the Supreme Leader represented an extension of de facto political power that Ruhollah Khomeini may have intended to gain for himself but did not achieve before his death.

Khamenei's Vision and Legacy

In 1989, many voices in the West hailed Khamenei's succession as a victory for the "moderates" in Iran against the "radicals," who had not flinched from a particularly rabid form of anti-Americanism given full vent in the 1979 U.S. hostage crisis. But political dynamism would come to characterize Khamenei's record. In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, he was known to have privately opposed the government's anti-Western policies and to have supported direct negotiations with American representatives. Many anti-West activists in Iran, among them the leader of the 1979 hostage-takers, expressed concern about Khamenei's appointment, suspecting that the new Supreme Leader would be too "pro-American." But with time, Khamenei would prove himself to be a true ideological heir of his predecessor by distancing himself from his own past statements in support of dialogue with the West and suggesting that anyone who advocated negotiations was "naive" or intimidated by U.S. power.

By contrast, and from his own center of influence as Iran's new president, Rafsanjani would make it his mission to gradually open Iran to Western influence. In the first decade of Khamenei's rule, Rafsanjani's supporters became known as liberal technocrat "reformists" who advocated free-market economics and integration into an increasingly globalized world. But Rafsanjani's circle also included advocates of civil society, democracy, freedom of the press, and cultural tolerance—concepts that represented a direct threat to the unchecked authority now becoming firmly entrenched in the office of Iran's Supreme Leader.

The tension between these two ideological camps may also have represented the early stages of a greater shift in Iran's political landscape, whereby a new generation coming to political awareness ten years after the 1979 revolution identified less with Islamic values than their predecessors. Iran's young population would not remember the widespread readiness, born of popular revolutionary fervor, to sacrifice personal freedoms under the heavy hand of repressive leadership. Nor would they recall the feelings of militant nationalism produced by the bloody eight-year war with Iraq. Indeed, this new generation would shortly begin to indicate significantly less

tolerance for theocratic notions of absolute power and the need for national isolation from outside influences. Yet in the face of these significant changes, Khamenei continued to expand and strengthen his access to levers of power in the Islamic Republic, and to thwart attempts by others in government to challenge his authority or curb his agenda.

In October 2020, Khamenei released a draft of the “Islamic-Iranian Blueprint for Progress,” a document that outlines his vision for the next half century. The final version of this blueprint has not been released as of this writing, so Khamenei’s publicizing a draft when he did may have been intended to address some of Tehran’s difficulties, including increased U.S. pressure, economic shocks, and mounting public doubts about the regime’s durability. The document’s prescriptions, at their core, reveal Khamenei’s two-pronged vision for achieving regional, even global, supremacy: total Islamization of all facets of life, which means continuing to resist Western notions of international order, politics, and culture, and the use of advanced scientific achievements to become technologically self-reliant. In short, the regime seems to be placing its bets on an even deeper marriage of fundamentalist ideology and modern technology.

A Warning to the West

In addition to asking Iran’s academic and clerical establishment for feedback on the blueprint, Khamenei ordered government branches and regime decisionmaking bodies to turn the document’s goals into operational plans. Once the final version is released, it will become the official set of guidelines for all government decisions. As currently written, the blueprint’s key conclusions center on “preventing threats against the Islamic Republic of Iran, expanding the Basij militia, and enhancing the country’s defensive and deterrent capability.” They also call for “promoting Islamic ecumenism” and “consolidating Muslim unity,” namely by “emphasizing their common creeds...promoting jihadism in the Muslim world, supporting Islamic liberation movements, and vindicating Palestinian rights.”

In total, the final section lays out fifty-six recommendations covering all

aspects of Iran's domestic and foreign affairs. In Khamenei's view, implementing these policies under the "continual leadership" of a "competent, brave, and just" Supreme Leader will carry the nation to new heights by 2065: "Iran will be a pioneer country in producing Islamic humanities [and] one of the world's top five countries in science and technology." At that point, he argues, Iran's "Islam-based policies, rules, and structures" will constitute the world's "main pillar of Islamic unity and brotherhood, regional stability, and global justice and peace." Iran will also become "one of the world's top seven countries" in its "level of justice and progress." As mentioned above, the decision to publicize these dreamy prescriptions now likely stems from the regime's desire to project self-confidence about its sustainability—particularly at a time when Iranian elites are concerned about persistent protests and a U.S. pressure policy they believe is aimed at regime change. The move can also be seen as Khamenei's warning to Europe, the United States, and its regional allies that Tehran intends to continue using defiance, pan-Islamism, and expansionism as essential components of its regional diplomacy.

Reaffirming Revolutionary Ideology

The blueprint outlines Khamenei's vision for Iran not only as a nation-state, but as the leader of a "new civilization," in keeping with the manner in which state media traditionally refer to him as the "guardian of the Muslim world." When he assumed power in 1989, he asserted himself as more than just a political leader or military commander-in-chief. He also sought to cement his role as the country's supreme ideologue, with absolute authority over the cultural and religious arenas. Despite his lack of religious credentials, he claimed the right to publish fatwas, teach high-level courses in sharia, and establish a monopoly over cultural and educational institutions.

The most salient result of this mindset was the massive transformation of Iran's central institutions, from revolutionizing the country's network of religious and civil organizations to remaking the IRGC into a giant, multi-dimensional body and regional force. He also tasked the entire government

with creating an ideological apparatus capable of implementing his totalitarian policies and resisting the West's "cultural invasion" of the Muslim world, which he depicted as a "new colonialism." Of course, the Islamization of Iranian life has largely failed in practice, partly due to the lack of viable Islamist systems in crucial sectors such as banking, but also because of civil society's remarkable resilience against regime attempts to enforce sharia codes (e.g., wearing the hijab). Although repressive mechanisms and security measures have proven efficient at maintaining political control, the regime has been unable to make citizens submit to its cultural demands despite its bevy of coercive levers and its monopoly over cyberspace and the media.

Nevertheless, Khamenei's blueprint for the next fifty years emphasizes cultural and ideological policies that have repeatedly failed in the past forty years. In his view, the duty of the soldiers who will fight this "soft war" is twofold: protecting society from contamination by the enemy's cultural viruses and producing authentic ideological content to differentiate the Muslim community's identity. Rejecting Western-style development, Khamenei's call for a "new Islamic-Iranian civilization" is in keeping with the five-phase process he has described in past speeches. The first three phases are "Islamic revolution," "Islamic regime," and "Islamic state." Once state institutions are solidly Islamized, the duty of citizens and government agents alike is to foster the creation of an "Islamic country," which will then serve as a template for a wider "Islamic civilization."

In Khamenei's view, the "Islamic civilization" begun by the Prophet Muhammad was interrupted by two major military offenses: the Crusades and the Mongol invasions, each of which left the Muslim world vulnerable to colonialism and Westernization. This worldview helps explain why Khamenei repeatedly rejects the Western model of development. As he put it in a May 2009 speech, "Progress should not mean development in its Western sense... By 'developed,' the West means a Western country with all its features, culture, customs, and political tendencies. 'Developing country' refers to a Westernizing country, and 'undeveloped country' means one that is neither Westernized nor in the process of Westernization."

In contrast, Khamenei champions his brand of "Islamic civilization" as an authentic revival of the Prophet Muhammad's experience, one devoid

of sheer materialist elements and aspirations to modernity. His predecessor similarly rejected non-revolutionary versions of Islam, casting this confrontational dichotomy as a battle between “Muhammadan pure Islam” and “American Islam.” To give his rhetoric on the subject a measure of doctrinal authority, Khamenei freely borrows the vocabulary of late Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, along with post-colonialist intellectuals like Edward Said. More than half of the new blueprint spells out the features of a utopia that closely resembles what has been expressed by many other Islamists in the past one hundred years.

Taken together, the guidelines in Khamenei’s manifesto promise nothing more than relentlessly maintaining the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary character. This includes resisting any domestic efforts to reform the regime’s ideological aspirations or, more importantly, its decisionmaking.

Political System as Autocracy

Not all pro-government religious authorities agree on all issues. Issues related to women, for example, lead to particular disputes, such as whether women should cover their head, face, and hands, or appear on television. Pro-regime mujtahids also disagree on the lawfulness of music and whether playing chess, without betting, is permissible. When Khomeini ruled in favor of chess playing, one mujtahid who had received his ijthihad certificate from the ayatollah himself protested this ruling. This protest elicited a sharp response from Khomeini, who argued that such legal principles would require worshippers to return to a premodern state of cave dwelling in the desert.

On the whole, the Iranian political leadership has trusted the political rulings of both Iranian Supreme Leaders over those of other clerics. For one thing, according to the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, the leader’s views trump those of all other jurists. In addition, the leader’s rulings have tended to be more practical than those of other mujtahids, largely because he must reconcile religious principles with the social and political realities of governance in a modern state. Other clerics are not similarly constrained and are often out of touch with such realities.

At first glance, the Islamic Republic may appear to be a clerical government in which Shia legal authority determines the structure of a legal system that draws its legitimacy from sharia. As such, it would seem that the religious opinions of Shia clerics would shape the legal and political direction of the state. Yet a closer examination reveals a more nuanced picture in both legal and political terms. At least in theory, the Majlis is the exclusive source of legislation in the Islamic Republic. It is true that laws produced by the Majlis must be vetted to ensure they do not conflict with either Islamic law or the Iranian constitution, but legislation itself need not be rooted in Islam. If a law is found to be insufficient in either of these areas, it is returned to the Majlis for modification and then subjected to a second review by the Guardian Council. If this second review still yields an objection, the legislation is passed to the Expediency Council, whose members are appointed by and advise the Supreme Leader. If the Expediency Council decides that the bill advances the interests of the country, even while contradicting Islamic law or the constitution, it can approve the bill and ask the president to do the same. Three important conclusions can be drawn from this process:

1. The legislature is not necessarily bound by Islamic law. If legislators believe a bill serves the interests of the regime, the bill can ultimately be passed with the help of the Expediency Council.
2. The clerical establishment, as the Shia legal authority, has no systematic relationship with the legislature. Only a small proportion of Majlis members are clerics (44 of 285, as of this writing), and members are not required to consult with the clerical establishment before passing a law. Even members of the Guardian Council are not appointed by the clerical establishment. Half are appointed by the Supreme Leader and half by the judiciary and the Majlis.
3. The Supreme Leader is the ultimate source of Islamic legitimacy for laws passed in the Majlis. A unique pillar in the legal system, the Supreme Leader also has sole authority to overrule Islamic law to promote regime expediency through the Expediency Council.

Given this last conclusion, how can one characterize the Supreme Leader's

relationship to the clerical establishment? In theory, the Assembly of Experts, which consists of high-ranking clerics nominally elected by the public and vetted by the Guardian Council, appoints the Supreme Leader, supervises his activities and decisions, and dismisses him if he fails to fulfill his constitutional duties. But the Supreme Leader, both directly and through the Guardian Council, has great influence over the makeup of the Assembly of Experts, in effect appointing the assembly's members himself.

According to Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, all clerics and Shia worshippers are subject to the orders of the Supreme Leader, who also serves as the ruling jurist, or "jurist of jurists," in the public sphere. This doctrine is premised on the view that the ruling jurist is the heir and divine beneficiary of the Prophet Muhammad and the representative of the infallible Hidden Imam. Thus, the Supreme Leader has authority over all earthly matters, beyond even sharia and the country's constitution, granting him—at least in principle, though with practical limits—enormous powers over society in general and the judicial hierarchy in particular. Given the Supreme Leader's authority as a jurist, he holds ultimate clout over any other mujtahid in granting fatwas regarding nuclear policy.

The concept known as "politics of extraordinary Islamic law" is considered by Islamists to be the only worthwhile lens through which to view worldly affairs and achieve spiritual salvation. In turn, the implementation of sharia is the Islamists' principal goal. Yet when Khomeini came to power, he soon understood that sharia, as it existed, was not compatible with the requirements of modern social and political life. In a letter to his disciple Muhammad Hassan Qadiri, Khomeini wrote, "The government cannot be run by existing jurisprudence." As a result, Khomeini invoked the principle of *maslaha*, which literally means "well-being" but in the judicial sense signifies public interest, government expediency, or, as it is known in political philosophy, *raison d'état*. Long before the Islamic Revolution, Sunni rulers and jurists used *maslaha* to justify acts of "necessity." If a tenet of Islamic law was seen as hindering the expediency of an Islamic government or the public interest, the mufti could suspend the law as needed. Sunni jurists felt such suspensions were justified on the grounds that sharia is meant to safeguard the interests of the community and Islamic government.

Often chafing at such rulings were the minority Shia, who lacked political power and opposed the suspension of divine law to resolve worldly, political issues. In response, several Sunni jurists argued that the notion of *maslaha* in Islam differs from the Western concept of *raison d'état* or utilitarian principles such as those elaborated by philosophers Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and others. The first difference is grounded in a transcendental conception of legal morality, where *maslaha* and its inverse, *mafsada* (literally, harm), cannot be restricted to this life alone but must also take into account the hereafter. The second is that *maslaha* cannot be reduced to the material world, but instead must be based equally on corporeal and spiritual needs.

The extent to which Khomeini shocked the Shia establishment by adopting *maslaha* as he did cannot be overstated. Indeed, this step was unprecedented in the history of Shiism. The effect of Khomeini's move was to aid the Iranian regime and allow the state to function in the modern world, rather than straining under the antiquated concept of government in Islamic jurisprudence. Khomeini himself wrote that *sharia* is not binding for the jurist ruler, who has the right to ignore prayer and other rituals (known as the Pillars of Islam) in favor of the regime's needs. Despite the seismic shift implied of Khomeini's stance, no other Iranian cleric dared oppose him openly. Interestingly, the only figure to even speak publicly of Khomeini's interpretation was his ultimate successor. In a Friday sermon in 1987, then president Khamenei addressed the proper role of an Islamic government in contract negotiations between business owners and employees. In response to the Supreme Leader's claim that the government can force employers to accept certain terms, the sitting president clarified that this did not mean "any conditions" but rather only conditions acceptable under Islamic law.

The Supreme Leader replied swiftly and bluntly to this interpretation, which reflected a mainstream opinion among Shia jurists:

From your sermon during Friday prayers, it seems that you do not believe that government is the absolute authority that God has given to the Prophet and is the most important order of God and precedes all other orders. You said in your sermon that I said that "the government has authority only within the

framework of Islamic law.” This is the absolute opposite of what I said...The government can unilaterally abrogate any religious agreement made by it with the people if it believes that the agreement is against the interests of the country and Islam. The government can prevent any Islamic law—whether related to rituals or not—from being implemented if it sees its implementation as harmful to the interests of Islam.

During the Islamic Republic’s first decade, the Supreme Leader did not hesitate to violate the constitution at will. His orders to form the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution, the Special Clerical Court, and the Expediency Council were all unconstitutional. The Expediency Council in particular was formed because Khomeini knew he would need assistance in identifying and assessing each individual case in which *maslaha* might be applicable. When members of the *Majlis* protested that the Expediency Council was unconstitutional, Khomeini responded in a letter: “You are right. God willing, we are planning to arrange everything in a way that...is based on the constitution. What happened in these years was related to the war. The expediency of the regime and Islam necessitated that the entangled knots get untied quickly in favor of the people and Islam.”

Architect of the New Clerical Establishment

In April 1989, following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered that the constitution be revised, paving the way for the formal incorporation of *maslaha* into the Iranian political system. This revision vindicated the long-held claim by the Supreme Leader that the initial constitution did not adequately recognize the authorities of the ruling jurist. In one speech, Khomeini described the initial constitution as imperfect, and continued:

According to Islam, the clergy is entitled to much more [authority]. In order to prevent some [secular] intellectuals from opposing the constitution, [the constitutional assembly] yielded a bit...[but the ruling jurist's authority] is actually much greater.

In addition to further empowering the ruling jurist, the amendment process led to a formal definition of the Expediency Council's roles, which included advising the ruling jurist; resolving disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council; approving bills ratified by the Guardian Council; and advising the ruling jurist on revisions or amendments to the constitution. In a much later interview, conducted with *Khabar* newspaper, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani also cited the authority of the Expediency Council to create laws. As of this writing, thirty-five of the forty-four members of the Expediency Council—along with the council's head—are Supreme Leader appointees who serve five-year terms. Ex officio members are the president, Majlis speaker, judiciary head, and Guardian Council members.

Under Supreme Leader Khamenei, the Expediency Council has been subjected to substantial structural changes that have rendered it a sophisticated

bureaucracy. Yet, however complex the Expediency Council has become, the Supreme Leader retains the right to intervene directly as needed, a right he has wielded on several important occasions. Since the ruling jurist has absolute authority and exclusive control in defining regime expediency, he can suspend any Islamic or constitutional law whenever he chooses to do so. This means that laws have no independent authority; they depend entirely on the Supreme Leader's validation. In such a system, politics never become normalized through the stable functioning of state institutions. Instead, every situation has the potential to be interpreted as extraordinary and manipulated to the liking of the Supreme Leader, possibly against the decisions of parliament, the president, and the judiciary. Thus, what might be called the "politics of the extraordinary" concentrates enormous power in the hands of the ruling jurist and defines the essence of the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei has stated that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam. But his language on the subject has become more equivocal over time, emphasizing only the prohibition on their use and not on their production or stockpiling. Should the needs of the Islamic Republic or the Muslim *umma* change, requiring the use of nuclear weapons, the Supreme Leader could just as well alter his position in response. This means that ultimately the Islamic Republic is unconstrained even by religious doctrine as it moves toward the possible production and storing of nuclear weapons. In principle, at least, the emergence of *maslaha*, or *raison d'état*, in the ideology of the Islamic Republic represented a step forward in recognizing the realities of running a modern state. The principle might have been channeled toward allowing the parliament and president to establish a shared understanding of the "national interest" that could strengthen those institutions and foster nascent democratic processes. In practice, however, *maslaha* has become a means of freeing the political system from Islamic law, further undermining Iran's democratic institutions and consolidating the Supreme Leader's control over state politics—in effect, laying the foundation for a clerical military dictatorship in Iran. Iranian nuclear decisionmaking, therefore, bears the significant imprint of one man's personality and politics—an imprint that may be unaffected by the will of other people, the decisions of other institutions, or, most ironically,

the legal scruples or moral dictates of his own religion.

Since 1989, when Khamenei became Supreme Leader, Iran's clerical establishment has been utterly transformed, experiencing unprecedented growth in its domestic and international networks as well as its finances and personnel. Concurrent with this growth, the Supreme Leader has tightened hardliner control over management of the Shia clerical establishment. Thus, he privately named Ali Reza Araf, a cleric who served as his appointee in various positions, as the new executive director for seminaries nationwide. The appointment of Araf, who still holds office as of this writing, was an important step in Khamenei's preparation of the country's clergy for the period following his death.

In the post-Khamenei era, the guiding principle for the Islamic Republic will remain that a clerical regime needs clerical bureaucrats and foot soldiers to ensure its rule and export its ideology. The Iranian government has therefore sought to consolidate its power through the mass production of clerics, the creation of organizations to employ and control them, and the remaking of non-Iranian Shia communities in Iran's image. On this count, the regime's totalitarian tendencies have increasingly expanded from areas such as the military and industry into the religious domain. In practice, though, regime efforts to exert control over the clergy have undermined clerics' ability to legitimize the regime, given that they have forfeited their independence and are effectively captives of Tehran.

The regime has also invested great effort in ensuring that the Shia clerical bureaucracy is thoroughly modern in its exploitation of technology to achieve its goals. So substantial has been the modernization of Iran's clerical establishment that a pre-revolutionary observer would hardly recognize its current form. The transformation began with Khamenei's takeover of power from a charismatic leader who firmly believed that Shia religious institutions should be purged of all those who refused to submit to a revolutionary reading of Islam and the monarchy's replacement by a clerical political order. In the fall of 1991, two years after Khamenei entered office, a pivotal event came in his first official visit to Qom.

Despite recognizing that many questioned his clerical credentials, he nevertheless elaborated as meticulously as possible his agenda for

revolutionizing the clerical establishment. In his lengthy public address to the clerics, he even sketched out an administrative hierarchy: "Seminaries and religious men cannot be indifferent toward the government and political affairs...This [government] belongs to you, to the clergy, religion; you have no choice. This is an Islamic republic. If you keep a distance, the republic becomes non-Islamic...One of the [seminary's] problems is clerics' economic issues...We have initiated seminary health insurance...I will heavily invest in it...in the housing problem...I have helped a bit in the past and intend to continue my help...The seminary lacks what every educational institution of such a caliber requires: an effective management apparatus...A supreme council should be formed...and a competent director appointed...If such a bureaucracy is created, I will provide financial aid and do my best." Millions of dollars were thus poured into the clerical establishment, aimed at bringing about quick, dramatic improvements on many levels.

The creation of this new clerical apparatus did not mean that every junior and senior cleric would receive direct financial or political benefits from the government. Rather, it established a framework outside of which an Iranian cleric could hardly operate. By making the establishment "transparent," registering data, and putting oral rules in writing, the government centralized authority in its own hands, implicitly doing away with previous operating structures. Only the government would be equipped to run a new structure so gigantic, costly, and sophisticated. In taking these steps, the clerical regime was likewise seeking to ensure that no political opposition, arising from the clerics or elsewhere, would emerge to threaten it.

In line with Khomeini's original vision, the Iranian clergy has, over the past four decades, grown into the largest, richest, and farthest-reaching clerical establishment in any Muslim nation. Gradually, clerics have become uniquely subordinated to the ruling jurist's political and economic authority. With respect to clerical organizational power and wealth, the Mashhad-based Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation is preeminent. The institution was previously led autonomously by Abbas Vaez Tabasi, who had successfully deflected Khamenei's twenty-five years of pressure to annex Mashhad's clerical organization to that of Qom. With Tabasi's death in March 2016, however, Khamenei acted quickly to realize a long-held vision: he appointed

his former student, Sayyed Mesbah Ameli, as the institution's executive director and moved to bring it completely under Qom's central management.

Much uncertainty remains regarding the future of Shia clerical leadership in Iran and beyond, largely because of the advanced age of Khamenei and the Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the wealthiest and most followed Shia religious authority after the Supreme Leader. If a leadership vacuum does develop, Iranian clergy may find themselves depending even more heavily on the state and feeling greater confusion about their social role and status within the political structure.

Arafi's Path to al-Mustafa International University

Descended from a Zoroastrian family whose members converted to Islam in the nineteenth century, Ali Reza Arafi is one of Khamenei's closest confidants. Khamenei has named him to sensitive positions, and Arafi has, in turn, been invaluable in implementing the ayatollah's ideological agenda in the clerical establishment and universities, both in Iran and abroad. Arafi's role embraces three components, the first being implementation of Khamenei's Islamization of universities. To this end, he served as head of the Office for Cooperation Between Clergy and Hawza (*Daftar-e Hamkari-ye Howzeh va-Daneshgah*)—founded in 1983 under Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi to replace standard humanities textbooks with Islamized versions compatible with the new regime's revolutionary ideology—and in several other leading university-related positions. Beginning in 2002 (and lasting until 2018), he was president of al-Mustafa International University. Fortifying his educational role was Arafi's appointment by Khamenei on June 7, 2011, as a member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, which governs ideological policy planning throughout the country's cultural arena. Working nominally under the president but in practice under the Supreme Leader, the council uses the leader's authorities and mechanisms to restrict freedom of expression in academia and beyond, effectively violating citizens' rights to education regardless of their religious or political convictions.

The second component of Arafī's role centers on his managerial talents, which he demonstrated as a young cleric by founding entities such as the Qom-based Institute of Ishraq and Irfan. In 2007, with Khamenei's informal approval, Arafī was appointed to the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, a hardline political body under Khamenei's authority that rules on all matters related to clerical politics. The third component, a major accomplishment related to his managerial skills, has involved his organization of seminaries for foreign citizens in Iran and abroad. In 2015, furthermore, Arafī was appointed as a Friday prayer imam for Qom, a prestigious position showing the government's eagerness to promote him in the country's ideological capital. In 2016, Khamenei appointed Arafī head of the clerical establishment (*hawza*).

In September 1979, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, responding to rising interest among young Muslims abroad in studying Shia Islam in revolutionary Iran, founded the Council for Managing Non-Iranian Seminarians' Affairs. The council, headquartered at the Hojjatieh Seminary in Qom and encompassing multiple national and international branches, especially in Africa, sought to provide ideological training to foreigners in Iran and, if possible, in their home countries. It also supported foreigners in building infrastructures for ideological propaganda and networking in their home countries. When tensions mounted between Khomeini and Montazeri in 1986, the Supreme Leader took steps to limit his counterpart's control over the institution by restructuring and expanding it. This appropriation of Montazeri's authority was part of a broader campaign by Khomeini during which he dismissed the cleric as his successor as Supreme Leader.

Later, Khamenei completed the job by forcibly severing Montazeri's links to religious entities with which he was affiliated. In 1993, Khamenei decided to modernize and personally take over control of the institution, separating it into the Global Center for Islamic Sciences, dedicated to foreigners in Iran, and the Seminaries Abroad section, devoted to ideological training outside the country. Arafī headed both divisions until 2009, when his proposal to merge them into a unified al-Mustafa International University (MIU) won Khamenei's approval. As the university's president, Arafī has magnified the regime's efforts to export its revolutionary ideology, building a colossal

infrastructure in Iran and dozens of other countries and constructing a sophisticated international network rooted in strengthened ties with groups like Lebanon's Hezbollah and partnerships with other academic, religious, or political institutions or individuals. MIU is a significant instrument at the regime's disposal for promoting the Iran regime's proselytizing on a national and international level, including through the publication of sporadic reports on its success in encouraging conversion to Shiism or Islam. In a January 2016 interview with the hardline journal *Ramz-e Obour*, Arafī emphasized the nonnegotiability of exporting revolution. "Revolution is international by nature," he said.

He then proudly recalled his twenty-year international record and his regular relations with various entities in "more than one hundred countries." He explained: "We have relations with clerical centers in Syria and Lebanon, and from time to time, we make a trip to [those countries]...Usually, each time I go to Lebanon, I have a meeting with [Hezbollah leader] Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah lasting somewhere between five and nine hours." By Arafī's estimation, 45,000 foreigners from 126 countries have graduated from MIU since its inception, with 25,000 individuals of nearly 130 nationalities studying there as of this writing. A great number of them live in Qom with their families. Worldwide, more than 6,500 female seminarians are studying at MIU branches. According to a young Iranian seminarian based in Qom, MIU has been critiqued for favoring aspiring American and European clerics over others through provision of better services. The validity of such a claim can likely be traced to the regime's desire to improve its reputation in the West. Other startling statistics relating to MIU include its seventy branches worldwide; regular relationships with more than one hundred other centers internationally; 150 websites; publication of 50,000 works in forty-five languages, as well as seventy journals; and management of 400 clubs with 8,000 members. The size and scope of MIU branches outside Iran vary, but all appear to be flourishing. A detailed introduction on MIU's main website reveals the enormous scale of its activities inside and outside the country. MIU has founded several affiliated entities, such as the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies, and even runs an extensive intramural sports program for students and their families.

Ali Reza Biniiaz, who directs the Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Seminary in Syria and serves as an MIU representative, believes one achievement of his seminary over the past four decades has been to train clerics to gain a “jihadist spirit and continue the Islamic resistance path.” In his interview with the Jamaran website in 2012, Biniiaz said that during Israel’s thirty-four-day war with Hezbollah in 2006 and other conflicts, Lebanese fleeing their country were supported by the seminary. Referring to what was then a new war in Syria, Biniiaz reflected, “Even in recent tensions, Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Seminary has been a base for seeking people’s rights and also continuing resistance against American and Israeli conspiracies.” According to Biniiaz, the 2012 student body was 80 percent Syrians and the rest foreigners, most of whom left after the war began.

“Before the existing war, 1,500 clerics, Syrian and non-Syrian, were studying in Syria,” he said. “Of that number, 650 were female and male seminarians from thirty-five countries.” Syria’s Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Seminary is only one of many such institutions founded by Iran since 1980. As reported by an Iranian expert on Syria, “Especially since Najaf had its own problems at that time and many Arab countries did not have a good political relationship with the Islamic Republic, their Shia citizens were coming to Syria to study religion.” In Lebanon, Khamenei has founded several seminaries and helped Hezbollah control all the country’s Shia seminaries. For instance, in 2011, the Baqiyatullah Seminary was opened in Nabatiyah by both Iranian and Hezbollah officials. On July 16, 2016, in his meeting with a delegation of Qom clergy led by Mohammad Hassan Zamani, a deputy on international affairs for Iran’s seminaries, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah insisted on the necessity of increasing cooperation between the Qom seminary and Hezbollah in “various cultural, religious, revolutionary fields,” thus indicating another area of connection between the Lebanon-based Shia militant group and actors in the Islamic Republic.

The most important domestic Iranian MIU branch is in Mashhad, where more than 3,000 foreigners from forty-six countries are studying. As in other branches, clerics’ spouses and children also receive various educational and welfare services. In addition to the current students, more than 3,000 people have graduated from the branch and returned to their countries to

assume religious or political positions. Most Mashhad MIU seminarians come from neighboring countries like Afghanistan, but some hail from Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, China, Tajikistan, France, Arab countries, and elsewhere.

In a 2014 interview, Hojatoleslam Muhammad Hassan Ibrahim, Khomeini's representative in Afghanistan, estimated that nearly 9,000 Afghans study in Iranian seminaries and about 10,000 Afghans in Iran's universities. In an earlier interview, Ibrahim noted that as of 2005, about 54,000 junior and senior Afghan clerics were living in Iran, either within or outside seminaries. Out of 65,000 legal Afghan residents in Iran—with the tally climbing to more than one million when illegal Afghans are accounted for—16,000 live in Qom, and about 1,500 study in Qom province's fourteen universities.

In 2009, Iran's Qom-based MIU signed a letter of understanding with Afghanistan's Ministry of Hajj, Guidance, and Endowments to cooperate on religious education and research. The Kabul MIU branch opened in 2012, and Shia clergy in Afghanistan depend heavily on the institution for their administrative services and credentials. The Indian subcontinent also has a strong connection to Iran's Shia establishment. According to Mehdi Mahdavi Pour, Khomeini's representative in India, more than ninety Shia seminaries are active in India and more than 1,000 Indians are studying at the Qom seminary. Khomeini also founded and funded Jamaat al-Urwat al-Wothona in Pakistan, which opened with 600 students. A seminary for women, Umm al-Kitab, was also formed, opening with 400 students.

According to the Iranian Basij militia, Pakistani graduates from Iranian seminaries have formed jihadist groups in Pakistan. Reinforcing this point, in March 2015, the funeral service for seven Pakistanis killed in Syria was held in Qom. The next month, in his meeting with the Pakistani ambassador to Tehran, Arafat urged more cooperation between MIU and the Pakistani government. In a 2015 interview, Hojatoleslam Gholam Reza Sanatgar, who heads the Improvement Bureau in the Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Higher Educational Complex, reported that the previous year, to mark Ramadan, MIU deployed 800 Iranian and non-Iranian clerics as missionaries and preachers to sixty countries. Such a deployment is a task shared by MIU and Iran's Islamic Culture and Relations Organization. According to Sayyed Mehdi Hosseini, the president of al-Mustafa Online University, MIU's online

branch, 7,000 students are now studying online. The online university is planning to admit 100,000 students by 2024.

Arafi's appointment as executive director of Iran's seminaries, to sum up, appears to have been driven by his matchless experience in international networking and infrastructure creation, his management knowledge, skill, and creativity, as well as his mastery of advanced communication technology. Those who preceded Arafi were all much older, guided by a traditionalist mindset, not known for breakthrough ideas and much less familiar than he is with modern leadership, academia, and technology. Greeted coldly by some clerical elders, Arafi's appointment reflects Khamenei's intention to invigorate the clerical role in supporting the revolution. In an August 1, 2016, speech, Arafi stated: "In the course of the development of the Islamic Revolution and the condition of the contemporary world, the clerical establishment [hazeh] should convert its enormous heritage into an effective [practical program]." As Mesbah Ameli, the director of the Khorasan seminary, said, "A director and teacher who is indifferent to the revolution cannot build a revolutionary seminary...We need long-term planning...a comprehensive program...a new action plan [to change the seminary curriculum] structure and content."

Even the Tehran seminary created a "revolutionary seminary base" aimed at realizing the Supreme Leader's ideal of "the Islamic Revolution's new seminary," as described by Gholam Reza Shah Jafari, a deputy at the Tehran seminary. Using a military term, "base," for a clerical entity along with a utopian Marxist term, "new man," reveals the Supreme Leader's discontent with the traditional establishment. This Khamenei-driven discourse on revolutionizing the seminary has been accompanied by a massive campaign by government-associated clerics. Mohammad Mehdi Mir Bagheri, the head of Qom's Islamic Sciences Seminary for Academics and an Assembly of Experts member, said that the "Islamic Revolution has changed the seminary's mission...fighting Western civilization is the main priority of the seminaries." Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamadani, a Qom-based Marja and an outspoken supporter of the regime, claimed that "a revolutionary seminary clears the way for the Appearance [return of the Mahdi, or Shia messiah]."

As vague as terms like "revolution" or "convert" may sound to outsiders,

older or traditional ayatollahs hear in them the prospect of unpleasant, drastic changes to the status quo with unpredictable or unmanageable consequences, thereby deepening concerns about the direction in which the Supreme Leader is taking the establishment. Such traditionalists, though, are loath to express their views publicly, lest they invite retribution from the government. For his part, Arafī has proved his full political loyalty to Khomeini, along with his understanding of the leader's ideological aspirations and objectives for Shia clergy in Iran and beyond. He has likewise demonstrated the resolve necessary to further "globalize" the revolution. In one early speech after he assumed office, Arafī emphasized that acquiring "a macro international vision is vital for the clerical establishment...We need clerics who [can respond] to the world's future developments." Such statements, and Arafī's leadership qualities, make him the ideal ideological tough guy, in Khomeini's view, to carry out the "cultural soft war against the West."

In the mid-1970s, Iran likely had no more than 10,000 clerics, junior and senior, in the entire country. Today, unofficial conservative statistics suggest the clerical population could be as high as 400,000, excluding some 40,000 foreign clerics in the country, mainly from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. That is in addition to female clerics and thousands of students in different areas of Islamic ideology, studying at hundreds of universities nationwide. These foreign groups represent a phenomenon that emerged after the revolution. Meanwhile, 2,000 clerics alone work at the Center for Management of Seminaries (*Markez-e Mudiriat Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), the central governing body for Iran's clergy. In April 2016, more than 19,000 applicants took admissions tests for the 2016–17 academic year. They were seeking to attend any of 475 religious schools in forty-nine centers (thirty provincial, nineteen urban) throughout the country. Of the test takers, a very high proportion, roughly 17,000, will be admitted. Reportedly, applicants to Qom alone included 500 students with bachelor's or master's degrees, ages twenty-two to thirty, including some with education in hard sciences such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry.

Apparently, the urge to swell the clerical ranks can hardly be satisfied. Ali Akbar Rashad, the head of the Council for Tehran Province Seminaries, says Tehran now has some 15,000 clerics, but that responding to "cultural and

outreach needs of a big city such as Tehran” requires 300,000 clerics—an implausible claim, because that would represent one cleric for about every fifty inhabitants. While Rashad appears to have underestimated the number of clerics in Tehran, or else limited them to current seminarians, reaching his stated objective would require massive financial investment. Muhammad Hossein Kabirian, who heads Tehran province’s “seminaries of brothers,” or male seminaries, does note that Tehran now has sixty active seminaries. “In Tehran, fourteen advanced courses, including courses by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and [Judiciary Chief] Ayatollah [Sadeq] Larijani, are taking place and 800 teachers are running seminary classes.”

Traditionally, teaching advanced courses (*kharej*) in Shia jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its methodological principles (*usul*) was so prestigious that only well-established senior ayatollahs were given the task. Indeed, teaching *kharej* can be likened to holding an endowed chair at a prominent university, a sign of the highest academic achievement. But since both the title of ayatollah and the role of teaching advanced courses have been politicized—now qualifying their bearers to assume political positions—the number of such courses and their teachers have taken off, often at the expense of instructional quality and course content. According to reliable sources, in the 2020 academic year, Qom saw 119 advanced courses on *fiqh* and 74 on *usul* while Mashhad had 33 courses on *fiqh* and 26 on *usul*. More than 300 in each discipline are taught in the rest of the country.

Emergence of Women Clergy Before the Islamic Revolution

Traditionally, Iran had almost no women serving as clerics or in clerical training, and only privileged women in religious or clerical families could afford to study religion, taking private courses from their immediate relatives. Today, the situation is entirely transformed. According to Mahmoud Reza Jamshidi, director of the country’s Seminaries for Sisters (*Howzeh-haye Elmieh-ye Khaharon*), more than 470 seminaries nationwide are now dedicated to female seminarians. He reports that more than 750,000 Iranian and

non-Iranian women are studying in fourteen majors in Islamic sciences, and more than 90,000 female clerics have already graduated.

In 2012, women seminaries reportedly were enrolling about 10,000 new students each year. Based on figures announced by Ali Reza Hajizadeh, the education deputy at Jamaat al-Zahra, Iran's largest female seminary, his institution has recently educated in the neighborhood of 13,000 seminarians in a given year. Women clerics also have access to hundreds of institutions and clubs for research, Islamic outreach, and related endeavors. According to Jamshidi, more than 350 religious schools for women are under construction, 180 of which will be ready for use in the years to come. Furthermore, 5,000 female students and 7,000 female clerics who maintain regular blogs benefit from financial and technical support from state organizations. To be sure, compared to male clergy, women are more restricted by regulations and systematic surveillance. For example, a regulation bans women clergy from using Latin terms in their correspondence. But throughout the country, women preachers and singers now lead a wide variety of rituals and female congregations. Many have also been employed by government bureaus, such as the Ministry of Education, to teach religion in schools.

By design, female seminarians follow a curriculum that diverges from that of their male peers. According to this model, women are expected to be trained relatively quickly on practical matters of Islamic law and ideological orientation, guidelines for leading religious ceremonies, and oratorical skills aimed at impressing audiences. Yet syllabi and textbooks for women are often of poor quality and do not allow them to compete intellectually with men. The same holds true, in general, for foreign clerics. Given the rigid segregation in practice, intellectual exchanges between men and women are severely restricted.

The Clergy's Crisis of Rationality

In clerical tradition, leading an advanced course on *fiqh* or *usul* suggests the teacher is a *mujtahid*, *faqih*, or an ayatollah, intellectually capable of independently understanding religious texts and deducing divine law. He

is thus religiously barred from following any other ayatollah or religious authority. In recent decades, though, such positions have been politicized and otherwise diluted of their previous significance. The government has interfered in the granting of such titles and positions to clerics who serve Tehran blindly, whatever their intellectual credentials. As a result, curricula and educational materials have suffered.

In large part, these developments represent the high-level response to intellectual and theoretical challenges posed especially by the young, educated, urban middle class, which lacks enthusiasm for the revolution and its faded ideals. To muffle these dissonant voices, whether in universities or the media, the government has built a cohesive clerical mechanism aimed at maintaining the brutal hegemony of Islamic ideology and its official representatives. For progressive clerics such as Nematollah Salehi Najaf Abadi, Mohsen Saidzadeh, Ahmad Qabel, Mohsen Kadivar, and Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari, freedom of speech is not tolerated in the clerical community or the broader public sphere. Police-state suppression by sophisticated means thus targets not only political dissidents but also religious reformists seen to threaten the model of conformity demanded by the police state. Currently, ayatollahs and other religious leaders may or may not have followers, depending on their managerial talent, social power base, financial network, and sometimes genealogy. If an ayatollah attracts considerable numbers of followers, he is called a grand ayatollah, or marja—a source of emulation. In Iran today, some thirty clerics operate as marja, although hundreds are likely qualified to do so.

Grand ayatollah status is signaled by publication of a *resaleh*, or legal practical guide, and success in appealing to a critical mass of worshippers. All grand ayatollahs who reside in Iran have an office in Qom, even if they live elsewhere. Currently, Sistani is the only marja living outside Iran who nonetheless has major offices in Qom and other cities. When Sistani and Khamenei eventually die, the number of grand ayatollahs is expected to increase, generating further fragmentation and fragility of independent religious authorities. The passing of these two Shia leaders will create uncertainty in other ways as well. Over his three decades in power, Khamenei has systematically transformed Shia Islam into an ideological tool to serve the

government's numerous needs, such as imbuing the Shia masses with a sense of their historical role in order to pursue political objectives, such as training cadres for service and providing "soldiers" in the soft war against Western and regional enemies.

This approach has largely succeeded, thanks to the infusion of immense sums of money to transform a stagnant, medieval-style religious institution into a modern bureaucracy, complete with digital technology and advanced communication tools. By 2011, 90 percent of the clerical establishment's administrative services were digitized. Senior clerics have been meaningfully involved in this transformation. They have agreed to this role largely to benefit from the massive financial resources provided by the government but also because the government employed various coercive tactics to ensure clerics would not deviate from government orthodoxy. Reflecting the scale of government investment in the clerical establishment, an administrative bureau known as the Center for Seminary Service (*Markez-e Khedmat-e Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), responsible for areas such as healthcare and affordable housing, received in one recent year \$134 million.

Aside from their substantial private-sector earnings, senior clerics receive unpublicized funds from the Supreme Leader's office to run more than 400 institutes defined as research, educational, outreach, or media entities. In all, the clerical establishment and its affiliated entities get more than \$500 million of the executive branch's budget. Overall, they receive more than \$1 billion annually from the ruling jurist's office. By accepting this staggering windfall, however, senior clerics have forfeit their symbolic capital as an intellectually dynamic force, including their freedom of expression and ability to respond autonomously to actions by the regime.

According to official statistics, in addition to high ranking positions in the government, some of which are reserved exclusively for clerics or ayatollahs, more than 600 clerics are employed in the ideological political directorate of the army; more than 800 in the judiciary; 12,000 as preachers in the Organization for Religious Endowments and Charitable Affairs; and tens of thousands in almost every government bureau, from universities to the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2013, officials announced that more than 40,000 clerics submitted applications for government employment. In 2015, officials

reported that about 2,000 clerics worked for the Ministry of Education alone. Yet the resulting economic impact on the clerical establishment has been double-edged: whereas before the revolution, taxes and donations were the sole basis of the clerical economy, they now constitute only a small part of it. The economic structure, financial resources, and networks of the Shia clergy are now entirely subject to government control and monitoring in Iran, and to a lesser extent abroad. Prior to 1979, typical clerical services such as leading congregational prayer, preaching at religious gatherings, or guiding pilgrims to carry out their duties properly were totally managed by clergy. But in the last four decades, especially under Khamenei, the clergy's freedom and autonomy to provide traditional services have been denied by the government. Today, even minor services and trifling interactions with society require official government permission.

Dozens of government bureaucracies now control mosques, religious centers, and rituals nationwide. The Committee for Mosque Affairs, Committee for Friday Prayer, Islamic Development Organization (outreach and propaganda), and Qom Seminary's Office of Islamic Outreach are among the massive organizations operating under direct supervision of the Supreme Leader. According to Sayyed Reza Taghavi, head of the Policy Planning Council for the Nation's Friday Imams, Friday prayer takes place in more than 900 cities in Iran. Employees at the Friday Prayer Committee exceed 40,000. Taghavi's deputy on provincial affairs says there are demands for holding Friday prayer in a hundred more cities and that the government is planning to provide such services. According to him, 218 mosallas, or Friday prayer centers, are under construction.

The entities in charge of ideological surveillance and punishment over the clerical establishment have included:

- The Division for Clerical Affairs in the Supreme Leader's office, headed by Ahmad Marvi
- The Division on Statistics and Investigation Within the Center for the Management of Seminaries
- The Intelligence Ministry's deputy on Marjaiya and Clergy Affairs

- The Intelligence Protection Organization (of the IRGC), which in 2018 was merged with several other intelligence organizations (the former head, Hojatoleslam Hossein Taeb, was arrested in 2022 for intelligence-related failures)
- The Special Court for Clerics (*Dadgah Vizhe-ye Ruhaniat*), which employs more than 4,000 clerics
- Independent Brigade 83 of the Jafar Sadeq Corps, currently commanded by Hojatoleslam Hossein Tayebi Far, Khamenei's former representative in Isfahan province
- The Saheb al-Zaman IRGC branch, which commands the Basij organization in the Qom and Razavi Khorasan provinces and, in cooperation with the Imam Hussein Squadron, oversees 14 Basij resistance bases in Qom and Mashhad and 170 Clerics' Basij bases
- The Organization for Basij Clerics, restructured by Khamenei as an independent entity in 2000

For instance, as Hojatoleslam Mohammad Jamali, head of the Gilan province branch of Organization for Basij Clerics, explained in a 2013 interview, the organization that year had 3,000 members, including 800 women clerics. In Gilan province alone, the organization was operating through thirty bases in seminaries and religious schools. The organization occupies three Basij resistance bases in the province, one for "sisters" and two for "brothers." Like the rest of the Basij organization, such individuals are focused on fighting "Western cultural invasion," and "commanding good and forbidding wrong." They stop women in public with warnings regarding noncompliant dress, and men for not following government regulations relating to social appearance and interaction with others. In practice, such figures serve as "religious police" who also get involved in suppressing political dissidents and their activities. In this discussion, the IRGC presents an interesting contrast to the clerical establishment. Whereas both fervently seek control of government funds and power, the IRGC tries to disguise its activity whereas the clergy is omnipresent, either as employees in government bureaus or ideological

police, exerting their corrective rulings in kindergartens, hospitals, beaches, metro stations, and elsewhere—even on state television and radio. Occupying a divergent range of jobs, clerics comment on the most private matters, even details of sexual interaction. The clerical establishment has thus become an ever-present enforcer of the government's authoritarian agenda.

Yet despite the government's scale of investment and sophistication of technique, it has, in the broader sense, failed to persuade the Iranian people of the merits of its cultural agenda. This failure is reflected in religious practice among ordinary Iranians. For example, the relationship between a practicing Shia citizen—say, a woman under thirty-five—and her chosen marja has changed dramatically since the pre-revolutionary era. Even a practicing religious citizen does not unquestionably follow their marja's religious decrees entirely, let alone nonreligious advice such as recommendations for elections or other political and social events. Ideals and values such as gender equality, tolerance toward non-Shia, or belief in human rights have penetrated the hearts and minds of even society's most religious strata. Hence, worshippers' approach to their marja has become more eclectic, with absolute obedience yielding to the calls of conscience and common sense.

Today, only by relying on the state's extraordinary resources can the clergy quiet their critics—and only temporarily. As for these adversaries, the Iranian Shia clergy might classify them as follows: representatives of what anthropologists call "popular Islam" as opposed to "official Islam"; ritual-based Islam versus Islam focused on sharia; and intellectual interpreters of Islam. Popular Islam, like vernacular language, by its fluid and dynamic nature does not submit completely to official authority. But after the revolution the government tried to appropriate this trend for political purposes, in many cases offering it as a counterweight to the clergy's inadequate strength or motivation to serve the government's agenda. The growth of popular Islam over the last three decades is exemplified in the *maddahs*, or religious singers, who have attracted the masses, and especially youth, desperate for entertainment, even if that entertainment comes in religious packaging. But the growth of maddahs, as implied already, owes largely to the government's well-planned agenda to weaken clergy and their authority over religious rituals.

Indeed, investment in popular Islam provides greater short-term rewards than investment in the clerical establishment. Compared to clerics, who have preexisting ideological frameworks that might clash with those of the government, ordinary worshippers and maddahs lack such institutional roots and are thus presumably more malleable. As of 2009, more than 45,000 religious clubs (*hayat nazhabi*) were registered in Iran, 5,500 of them for women. According to a 2010 report, 48,000 licensed maddahs and fifty-one training centers for the licensing of maddahs were operating nationwide. In Tehran alone, 5,595 maddahs were active. Unlicensed maddahs are estimated to number more than 100,000. Besides the House of the Nation's Maddahs (*Khane-ye Maddahan-e Keshvar*), founded in 2009, a university specializing in maddahi was founded in Tehran in 2014. Dozens of maddahs reportedly have been deployed to Syrian war zones. The House of the Nation's Maddahs also deploys them to Muslim countries, Europe, and elsewhere.

Another threat, not at all easily appropriated by the government, is posed by "religious intellectuals," who advocate an alternative reading of Islam more compatible with Western cultural and political values—and consequently more appealing to the country's educated urban religious population. This religious intellectualism emerged under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, when the shah ceased his antireligious policies out of fear of communism and to enhance his religious legitimacy. Various religious institutions, media entities, and other activities sprang up as a result. Whereas this prerevolutionary religious intellectualism mainly buttressed political Islam, the revolutionary clergy at least tolerated it as a means of mobilizing urban middle-class youth for their agenda. Yet in the decades following the revolution, religious intellectuals have become mostly anticlerical critics of Islamic ideology, seen as a challenge by both government and the clergy. Secular intellectuals, too, inspired by Western and leftist thinking, have found their voice in the last two decades and cut into clerical dominance of public discourse.

On the other end of the spectrum are those seeking a more stimulating Islam in the face of an establishment bound to the status quo. Small but influential pockets, found within the military, Basij, and government sectors, subscribe to apocalyptic theories and messianic trends. Broader perhaps

is adherence to Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, which seeks an Islam less focused on sharia or entirely free of it. Secret networks associated with Sufi movements, which embrace an esoteric mindset, are despised by clergy and state alike. For different but probably more fundamental reasons, Sunni Islam is likewise seen by the establishment as both an internal and an external threat, likely resulting in a less forgiving stance toward Sunnism. In his early speeches after assuming office, Ali Reza Araf expressed his concerns about Sunni influence. As is usual in government discourse, he identified the general Sunni threat with Wahhabi Islam, associated with Iran's rival Saudi Arabia. Christianity and the Bahai faith are also attracting fast-growing numbers of Iranians, alarming religious and political authorities. In recent years, marjas and other senior clerics have constantly lamented the expanding influence of Christianity in the Islamic Republic.

In July 2016, in his first public speech as executive director of Iranian seminaries, Araf expressed his deep concerns about the multitude of "Qom's rivals," including converts to Sunni Islam or Christianity. "The clerical establishment has been the origin of a revolution, and naturally it faces a countless army of adversaries and competitors," he said. "Today, the atheist movement has nearly five hundred million advocates...Qom is responsible before all these rivals, because its waves have penetrated into Iran too. Moreover, we are not only responsible for Iranians, we have to work for the entire world." He added: "Christianity is another rival that is running more than academic centers in the world; it produces thousands of articles and journals every day and owns hundreds of radio and satellite TV channels... Today in Iran too, [underground] home based churches in Tehran and Karaj are growing."

As reflected in Araf's remarks, a drift toward atheism or nonreligious forms of spirituality unsettles Iran's gatekeepers no less than conversion to other religions or branches of Islam. For the establishment, all such developments suggest a "Western cultural invasion" or "soft war" that is rapidly and radically changing the lifestyle, vision, and normative principles of Iranian citizens. Islamic ideology itself is at stake in this contest, and the government has admitted, in various ways, that it is losing. Signaling this loss even within families integral to the clerical establishment, senior clerics

and establishment officials in recent years have repeatedly complained about the increasing prevalence of “moral corruption and deviation” among seminarians and younger generations of clerics. To fight this contagion, the establishment created a new division under the “deputy on seminaries’ edification” to provide programs for the moral refinement of clerics and their families, invisible monitoring of their public behavior, and evaluation of their educational credentials based partly on morality tests. Furthermore, in coordination with the Special Court for Clerics, the division uses coercive mechanisms to correct or discipline violators of the establishment’s moral codes. This is primarily intended to prevent the clergy’s social image from being tarnished.

However much Iran’s clerical establishment appears to be in lockstep with the regime, it finds itself in an impossible dilemma: the clerics rely on government largesse for their increasingly sophisticated infrastructure, but they cannot hope to retain popular legitimacy if they are seen as a mere extension of Tehran. At least some members of the establishment have agonized over this codependence, which has hardened over the last three decades. Khamenei has made plain that the Shia clergy should have no illusions about their common fate with the country’s Islamic government. Indeed, he has menacingly urged the clerics to remain “revolutionary” and become even more so, which to him at this point means mainly anti-American, although it also means upholding the belief in an Islamic government rooted in governing all dimensions of public life through strict implementation of sharia. To this end, a number of initiatives are now under way to ensure the establishment preserves this revolutionary spirit, both through repression of defiant elements and harassment of those that are passive.

In March 2016, addressing the council representing Qom’s seminaries, Khamenei warned about the danger posed by those clerics who explicitly reveal their lack of faith in revolutionary ideals or whose disguised disloyalty or disinterest goes unnoticed. Despite these enormous government pressures, clerics have made piecemeal efforts to establish autonomy. Toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, young clerics managed to convince Ayatollah Khomeini to allow them to form a Council of Representatives for Seminarians (*Majmou-ye Nemayandegan-e Tulab va Fozalai-ye Howzeh*), an administrative

entity wherein representatives are selected by an internal vote for each province. Yet over its three decades, the council has failed to become a key decisionmaking voice in the clergy's administration. In a report published in 2014, clerics from this body, ironically perhaps, showed their deference to Western democratic models in seeking empowerment through the council's seventh election: the report, published on a clerical news website, was titled "Clergy Majority Participate in the Democratic Process of Seminary." Another initiative, begun in 2003 by a few dozen clerics and seminary teachers—the Assembly of Intermediate- and Advanced-Level Teachers—defined its mission as addressing institutional needs and problems.

Despite all its cautionary measures and coordination with the relevant authorities, this entity was perceived as having a hidden agenda in competing with the government-linked Society of Qom Seminary Teachers and pursuing depoliticization of the clerical community. Yet the assembly survived and expanded thanks to support from a majority of Qom's respected marjas, support that revealed their epidemic distress over the clerical establishment's future autonomy. At a conference held in the office of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Vahid Khorasani on May 20, 2016, more than a thousand teachers attended. However, the survival of such initiatives depends on constant reassurances to the government about a commitment not to defy the authorities or challenge the status quo. Inevitably, the government has imposed constraints on this group that effectively render it ceremonial, a mere "pretender to independence." This arrangement ultimately satisfies the aims of neither party, denying the clerics enough independence to soothe their unhappy collective conscience while undermining their ability to legitimize the regime because they themselves lack autonomy.

With these broader trends in mind, the summer 2016 appointment of Ali Reza Araf as executive director of the country's seminaries can be regarded as a turning point in the further radicalization of the Shia clerical establishment. The move was aimed at more effectively serving the government's totalitarian ideological agenda inside Iran and its policy of exporting the revolution in the Middle East and beyond. Araf's background and skills in managing the highly influential al-Mustafa International University, with its global network and robust ties to Islamist individuals and organizations,

qualify him uniquely to lead the country's largest and oldest institution. In paving the way for Iran's regional hegemony, such a multidimensional and multitasking body, under Araf's management, could become as essential as the Qods Force under the late Qasem Soleimani's command. Indeed, the appointment followed a series of others to sensitive positions. The common characteristics of all such appointees were their fairly young age, their possession of modern, advanced managerial skills, and their personal loyalty to Khomeini and ideological affinity with him. The Supreme Leader hopes that placing such competent hardliners in key positions will secure the government's anti-American and anti-Western path after his death.

Once Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989, many of his appointees hailed not from the first generation of the Islamic Republic but rather from a new generation of politicians with military or security backgrounds. Since then, this approach has gradually transformed the country's top military structure—the IRGC—into a key player in Iranian politics and economics, allowing Khamenei to establish a very powerful centralized authority. This in turn gives him the last say on foreign policy, the nuclear issue, and many other matters. To be sure, the Supreme Leader is not omnipotent, and various factors and individuals have affected his decisions over the years. Attempts to unify the government and completely dissolve factionalism within the ruling elite have failed, often generating crises instead. Yet Khamenei has established numerous mechanisms to manage schisms and exert his authority. For example, Khamenei's "house"—the Office of the Supreme Leader—has from its inception been led and staffed by personal acquaintances and loyalists, most of whom are bureaucrats rather than politicians. Thus, while the office influences him by determining what information he receives, Khamenei has sought to keep political factors from seeping into that information by personally managing the office and bringing close friends into his inner circle.

A look at the structure of this "house" can therefore help explain how the Supreme Leader thinks, what he believes, and whom he trusts. For example, Khamenei has kept his office distant from the clergy, unlike his predecessor, who surrounded himself with clerical disciples. Over the years, a new bureaucracy was imposed on the once-independent clerical establishment.

The nature of the Islamic Republic, combined with Khamenei's efforts to consolidate control, made the seminaries completely dependent on the regime for financial and political support. Today's clerical establishment is both the wealthiest in Iran's history and the least likely to call for a secular, democratic government that would remove many of these benefits.

On the political front, Khamenei has had to navigate tensions with the country's other top office, the Office of the President, even going so far as to question whether the position should be abolished. While the president's powers are limited to the executive branch and greatly constrained by institutions under the Supreme Leader's control, he can challenge the ruling jurist's authority in many cases. Khamenei lacks the founding leader's charisma and popularity, so he has been forced to devise sophisticated measures for keeping the president in check—sometimes with nearly disastrous results. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency best illustrated how such tensions can play out, and how the Supreme Leader failed in his goal of ending factionalism by spearheading the election of someone he regarded as a subservient president. Despite paving Ahmadinejad's way to electoral victory, Khamenei felt compelled to turn on him once he began to exert independence from the Supreme Leader and the IRGC and to develop his own sphere of economic and political influence. For example, Khamenei allowed the judiciary, intelligence, and media apparatuses to accuse various people in Ahmadinejad's circle of economic or moral corruption, connection with opposition movements, or links with Western governments. In the end, such efforts harmed both Khamenei's personal image and that of the Islamic Republic.

The mass protests that followed Ahmadinejad's disputed 2009 reelection forced the Supreme Leader to resort to violence against peaceful demonstrators, leading many Muslims throughout the world to question the regime's religious legitimacy. Moreover, his subsequent efforts to control Ahmadinejad effectively forced him to discredit the same person he wanted to keep in power. Some early signs suggested a less perilous relationship with Hassan Rouhani, who served as president from 2013 to 2021. Rouhani sought common ground with the Supreme Leader on issues such as reducing the IRGC's role in the country's economy. The Supreme Leader, in turn,

was generally supportive of Rouhani's efforts in the nuclear talks with the West. No doubt, keeping up such a dynamic depended on the president's sustained deference.

The Supreme Leader has also kept other branches of the government under his thumb. He frequently intervenes in legislative decisions, whether through direct letters to the speaker of parliament or by sending word through the Guardian Council and his personal office. More important, he controls the SNSC, a small group responsible for designing Iran's defense and security policies and responding to internal and external threats. Although the president is the council's titular head, Khamenei's personal representative truly leads its deliberations, and most other members are his appointees. Today, the council has sway over many foreign policy matters, including the nuclear issue. In recent years, Khamenei has taken pains to disavow the approach that former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took on the issue. In particular, he has claimed that he is not responsible for policies he regards as soft and ineffective. In his view, the "flexibility" shown by past nuclear negotiators without his approval only encouraged "the enemy" to make bolder demands. Since then, Khamenei has taken steps to assume ownership of the nuclear portfolio, such as establishing control over the SNSC and forming a negotiating team stocked with loyalists.

Finally, Khamenei's relationship with the IRGC is perhaps the most complicated factor in regime decisionmaking. Since assuming power, he has transformed the Guards from a military force to a religious, political, economic, and cultural complex, one that controls the country's media and educational system. But despite the IRGC's power and numerous internal rifts, there is no evidence that any of its commanders is in a position to challenge the Supreme Leader's authority. Khamenei has kept the Guards in check by, among other measures, purging old commanders, planting his personal representatives throughout the ranks, and appointing each commander's deputies himself. In fact, many of these deputies report directly to him.

Khamenei has changed his views on certain issues in the name of political expediency. For example, when he first became Supreme Leader, he found it necessary to put aside his (private) opposition to actively anti-American

policies. He did so not out of any grand ideological shift, but simply to confiscate political capital from the leftists who had grown powerful during the previous reign. By becoming more anti-American than the anti-Americans, so to speak, he was able to marginalize them and increase his own authority. His hold on power is much stronger today, so a major shift is less likely unless domestic pressures increase dramatically. He may not be able to eliminate his critics within the political elite, but he has protected his interests thus far by curbing the influence of those seeking to remodel Iran's anti-American, anti-Israel, and nuclear policies.

8

Personalist Leader

“Princes, especially new ones, have found more fidelity and assistance in those men whom at the beginning of their rule they regarded with suspicion than in those whom at first they trusted.”

—*The Prince*, Machiavelli*

The traditional financial resources of the *marjaiya* have been fundamentally affected by politics since the clergy became involved in Iran’s Islamic Revolution, and this continued trajectory will have implications for Ayatollah Khamenei or his successor.

Muhammad Reza Shah’s government pursued a specific policy of gradually controlling religious activities. To pursue that goal, some state institutions, such as the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tehran and the Ministry of Education, had begun to hire clerics to organize the government’s religious programs. Many clerics went to the university, either as teachers of theology or as students, as well as to the Education Ministry in order to teach religious doctrine. Revolutionary figures were among the clerics who left the seminary for the university to teach or study. Reza Shah had allowed the clerics to take some government positions. Thus, for the first time in the modern period, Iranian clerics became official employees of the government and enjoyed an income that was substantially larger than their traditional income. Some clerics who benefited from government positions and the associated economic perks were revolutionaries who fought undercover against the shah’s power, whereas others supported and served the shah.

*Drawn from the SparkNotes edition, previously available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/full-text/chapter-xx/>.

Revolutionary *mujtahids* like Ayatollah Khomeini changed the traditional financial mechanisms of the seminary.

In the past, the exclusive income of a *marja* came from his followers' religious taxes. Worshippers had to pay most of their religious taxes to the mujtahid they followed, while giving the rest to the poor. In the course of the Islamic Revolution, many people shifted loyalty from their own mujtahid, if he was not revolutionary, to Khomeini. Although traditionally a mujtahid was chosen based on religious criteria, politics now intervened, affecting people's decisions. This began before the revolution, notably in the early 1970s, when the shah injected the sharply rising income from petroleum into the national economy and made some people very rich, especially the *bazaaris*, or merchant class. Khomeini's personal income increased greatly as a result of the growth in his followers and their tax payments. Some experts believe that without the shah's flawed petroleum policy, Khomeini could not have achieved his political goals.

The End of Marjaiya

Shia religious authority in its modern form will likely fade after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who was born in 1930. Because marjaiya depends on a specific epistemological and theological paradigm, as well as a chain of social, cultural, and political-historical contexts, its decline can be ascribed to a paradigm shift. That Sistani is the last mujtahid to achieve such popularity and influence is not accidental. In Iran, the process of becoming a marja has gradually come under the government's control, and marjaiya has almost lost its legitimacy as a civil and independent institution. In Iraq, the Najaf seminary itself—isolated from Iran and unable to receive Iranian students, who have more chance of achieving marjaiya than other nationalities—has been in decline for many decades. Najaf seminary is in such a tough situation that it will likely be intellectually impotent for decades to come.

Intellectual output from seminaries, if any exists at all, is centralized in Iran; even if Iraq were to achieve stability, the seminary is not capable of dynamic and lively intellectual activities such as high-level courses or

publications. Needless to say, because the Shia clerical establishment lacks an official institutional hierarchy, a marja has—in theory and generally also in practice—no power or right to appoint his successor. In Shiism, a marja passes away without delivering his political and social influence or his economic wealth to anybody else. His properties and financial heritage remain in the hands of his family, and the family usually keeps the assets, spending part of them for religious expenses and keeping part of them as their personal benefits and wealth. A marja's symbolic and material wealth is not transferable at all. From the beginning, marjaiya was tightly wound up with the state of political authority and the existing government. When the central government is weak, the involvement of the marja in political affairs or in the general public sphere increases, and vice versa. When the central government is strong and capable of implementing its authority in the country, the political and social power of the marja decreases. Thus, marjaiya as an independent institution could operate on the political and social level during various opportune moments, such as Iran's Islamic Revolution. But in all cases, marjaiya did its job not from a political position but merely as a religious authority. Whatever Sistani does in the political domain also occurs from that perspective. He does not regard himself (nor do his followers regard him) as a political figure with a political agenda but rather as a religious and spiritual authority who has the right to control public crises or their effects on the political process.

After Sistani, a kind of polarization will likely happen, as described earlier. Whether future marjas eschew politics or try to gain stature as “official” state marjas, their religious and consequently their political influence and social popularity will remain limited to narrow strata of worshippers or government loyalists. The Islamic Republic of Iran (as the first religious government in the Shia world in recent centuries) and Ayatollah Khomeini (as a marja who founded a government by theological justification) have played a major role in the secularization of marjaiya and the transformation of Shia, at least in Iran. Religion in Iran has been remodeled from a maximalist view and a belief that it can manage all of society and politics to a minimalist view of sharia that allows it to govern only the relation between Allah and human beings. Hence, most of a marja's influence will be confined to worshippers' individual

religious duties and will hardly reach politics. Future mujtahids will either officially join the political power structure and lose their independence, or they will try to be apolitical and take care of followers' religious needs.

It is very hard to imagine that in Iran, in any future political development, mujtahids can play an important role as they did in the 1906–10 Constitutional Revolution or the Islamic Revolution. The mujtahids' increasingly limited influence (many of the younger generation do not pay their religious taxes or follow a mujtahid as their ancestors did) makes them unable to mobilize people for political and social goals. The increasing power of *maddahs*, or nonclerical preachers, in the last decade, which worried the government, is significant proof that even in the realm of rituals or other religious ceremonies, worshippers prefer nonclerics to clerics. Both the clerical establishment and the Supreme Leader have mildly attacked such nonclerics, and the Assembly of Experts has created a committee to consider the issue.

The deterioration of *marjaiya* has resulted in the empowerment of two religious groups: nonclerics who are in charge of the management of religious ceremonies and rituals, like *maddahs*, and religious intellectuals. After much criticism of fundamental religious concepts, especially their social and political promises and roles, religious intellectuals were able to discredit the clerical understanding of Islam in general. For younger Iranians, especially students, the traditional perception of Islam produced in the seminary has been delegitimized for many epistemological and historical reasons. In this situation, mujtahids do not represent the "real" Islam. Instead, that role falls to the intellectuals who can understand Islam in a way that makes the believer able to reconcile his beliefs with liberal democratic ideals of modernity.

Thereafter, two kinds of religion appeared: a popular, ritual-focused, and traditional form, which chooses its reference in groups such as *maddahs*, and a new form that is reasoned, critical, dynamic, and seeks its reference in intellectuals. Although nonclerical managers of religious affairs cannot undertake the responsibility for any kind of social and political leadership, intellectuals have a chance to mobilize the people in certain circumstances. The beginning of the post-*marjaiya* era will be marked by dramatic changes

in financial resources for the clerical establishment. Traditionally, the main financial resources for marjas were the bazaar (commerce) and worshippers' religious taxes. In the new era, a mujtahid who is unaffiliated with any government, in Iran or another country, will have limited financial resources. A mujtahid who officially works with the government will be wealthy, with traditional business investments as well as benefits from governmental favoritism and monopolies. Hence, power lies with the money. To have more power, a mujtahid is forced to become loyal to and dependent on the government; being apolitical means that he accepts a limitation on his financial resources and the associated effects on his social popularity and influence.

Ironically, both categories of mujtahids—state and nongovernmental—are depriving themselves of the means to increase their social popularity. In the history of marjaiya, the wealth of a mujtahid was a major component of religious authority and social popularity, but in the post-marjaiya era, the wealth of a mujtahid comes mainly from nonreligious sources and does not help much in setting up a religious advantage and social acceptance. The Iranian clerical networks in Iran and abroad will become political rather than religious networks. One of the main differences between a religious network and a political network is that the first is very traditional and primitive and the second is very modern and sophisticated, using advanced technology for expanding its authority. Therefore, the nature of clerical networks will change in the post-marjaiya era. The financial resources of the seminary and almost all religious institutions, from shrines and endowments to study centers and publications, now depend on the government. Institutions that cannot earn money need the government's support. By allocating a hefty budget to religious institutions, the Islamic Republic took away their independence and made them very fragile. Any dramatic political change in Iran that leads to removal of the religious regime will affect religious institutions tremendously.

Political Implications of the Decline of Marjaiya in Iraq

In the absence of a great marja in Iraq, such as Sistani, mujtahids would have a small community of followers in the country without the chance to expand outside Iraq. Localization of marjaiya would have many consequences, including a transformation of the social and political role of mujtahids. In such a situation, the political and social influence of a mujtahid would seem to be no more than the influence of a tribal head. Whereas the head of a tribe has a position of authority within a precisely defined community and on specific issues as determined by tradition, the authority of a mujtahid in quantity and quality would remain obscure, fluid, and flexible.

In a context such as Iraq, where religion and sect are not merely a matter of spiritual belief but also a component of political and social identity, every Shia political party needs to attract the support of mujtahids. But in the absence of a great marja, the variety and number of mujtahids and their followers will diminish the importance of their support, leaving no choice but for the relation between political parties and religious authority to undergo a fundamental change. This would also diminish the role of marjas in the community. If during the last several years, Muqtada al-Sadr, the radical Shia militant, could not be fully controlled by a marja like Sistani, or Sistani could not manage the hostility between Shia and Sunnis in today's Iraq, then a mujtahid can hardly hope to usurp or have any significant authority over a political movement or party.

In a post-marjaiya era that coincides with the politicization of the religious network and the economic weakness of independent mujtahids, Khamenei's influence in Iraq will increase, to the extent that he still wields power in his waning years. By injecting money into charities and civil or religious institutions, and by financially supporting the religious establishment in Najaf and other Shia areas, Khamenei's apparatus will expand the Shia network in Iraq and take advantage of the absence of a great marja to create an overwhelming Shia network that is not only Iraqi but also connected to a large global network controlled by Khamenei. Religious authority in Iraq would remain independent from the Iraqi government and without

any ambition to participate in governmental decisionmaking except in crisis moments. But because the Iraqi seminary is not strong intellectually and financially, it will remain eclipsed by the Qom seminary. The Najaf seminary, if it wants to survive and revive, must cooperate closely with Qom, which means working with an establishment that has already come under government control.

Iranian authority in Iraq will restrict the activities of Iraqi mujtahids and carry out strict surveillance as it did for Sistani. The mujtahids in Iraq see themselves as having their own considerations and hesitations with respect to the Iranian government. If Iraqi mujtahids keep themselves independent from the Iraqi government, they will be more dependent on the Iranian government. By politicizing religious authority, the independent Mujtahid will be marginalized and left without any significant importance and influence. The process of politicizing religious authority will reduce the independence of the clerical establishment, and its political and social activities and functions will be linked to political power games. Even in a stable and secure Iraq, its clerical establishment would likely be unable to play a fundamental role while remaining independent. In the post-marjaiya period, the winner in the short term is the Iranian Supreme Leader, who has usurped the religious network in the Middle East. From Kuwait and other Gulf countries to Lebanon, the Supreme Leader has already taken control of most clerical networks.

In the post-marjaiya era, the Iranian Supreme Leader will become the head of religious networks in the Middle East that may not represent the diversity of Shia discourses, but that monopolize authority and influence with massive financial facilities and capabilities. The effect of politicizing religious establishments and networks and the consequent degeneration of marjaiya is not the same in Iran and abroad. Its effect in Iran is perhaps the reverse of what may happen outside Iran. Politicizing religion in Iran would enable religion and its institutions to mobilize socially and politically, whereas outside Iran such politicization would unify the Shia under the leadership of Iran's Supreme Leader in order to protect their identity in political and social quarrels and challenges.

The decline of marjaiya, which is related to the waning of the Shia

seminary's independence, is essentially caused by two facts: the anti-Shia policy of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and the emergence of a Shia clerical government in Iran. Both in opposite ways succeeded in destroying the seminary and the authority that comes from it—the first by suppressing it directly and hostilely, and the second by depriving it of its independence and transforming the seminary from a semi-independent, semi-civil institution into an affiliate of the political authority. The end of marjaiya is a sure sign that Shiism has used up all its theological and historical capital to become more political. Tehran's confiscation of Shia networks will probably be very challenging to the West and devastating to the region. In the absence of Shia moderate organizations and independent political institutions, the tolerant, liberal, democratic, and moderate front in Shia worlds will remain seriously weak and unable to launch an effective political, social, and cultural operation. Moderate forces, whether traditional or modernist, are in such a divided, scattered, and unorganized position that no effective, operative, and independent moderate forces exist in the Shia world that can derail or resist the vast, suppressive, and aggressive machine of Shia extremist forces.

Politicizing the seminary and ending marjaiya are the direct result of deliberate policies carried out by Iran's two Supreme Leaders, whose authority stands above all the other various Shia networks in the region. Khamenei believes himself to be "the Leader of the Islamic World" (his official title in Iranian state media), has achieved the creation and expansion of a Shia network at least throughout the Middle East. He became the master of the network through radical ideological propaganda, which responded to the multiple aspects of the regional crisis; to the absence of democratic forces, or the ineffectiveness of democratic intellectuals; to the tremendous gap between these intellectuals and society; and to the dysfunctional and undemocratic governments of other Islamic countries. He also reached this position of leadership over the Shia network by allocating a hefty part of the country's national income to his ideological campaign in a way that overwhelmed the traditional financial resources of the seminary.

Khamenei is now the master of the Shia network in the region. Even Sistani as the greatest marja of the Shia world has no great power to make any dramatic change in politics or on social grounds. Developments in Iraq

have shown that Sistani has been incapable of preventing the Shia political groups from entering into a sectarian war. He no longer seems particularly able to use his role as a spiritual figure to reduce tensions. Most important, from the viewpoint of American policy, is the fact that a post-marjaiya era means the success of the Iranian regime's ideology to mobilize all Shia radical forces in the region and organize them against Western interests. In every political crisis in the region, the United States should be aware of the extraordinary degree of influence Iran has on all political organizations among Shia throughout the region. The United States also should be aware that the traditional independent Shia religious authorities no longer exist or are on the threshold of decline. Those authorities cannot be considered reliable in resolving a crisis in favor of Western countries.

In sum, the beginning of the post-marjaiya era is a challenging time for the United States and may lead to the escalation of tension between Islam and the West, if Western countries do not seriously consider this fact and reprioritize diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Understanding the decisionmaking process in the Islamic Republic has become all the more urgent since Ebrahim Raisi was elected in the June 2021 presidential elections. Raisi's election was predicted by most Iran analysts weeks before the announcement of final candidates that competed for the race in the Council of Guardian, which consists of twelve members: six ayatollahs appointed by Khamenei and six lawyers introduced by the head of the judiciary, who is himself an ayatollah appointed by Khamenei. That gives Khamenei and his faction total control of who would and would not run for president. Raisi, unlike his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, has been a favorite of Khamenei for more than three decades. Raisi, has proven himself to be a loyal sycophant on the Islamic Republic's agenda and has gone the extra mile in making sure it survives and its enemies are not only defeated, but crushed.

After Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1988 for all prisoners steadfast in their support for the opposition and "waging war on God" were "condemned to execution," Raisi, at the time a judge in Tehran, was appointed to a group that conducted trials for these political prisoners. These trials reportedly sometimes took less than fifteen minutes and the prisoners were only asked one question: will they repent? This group earned its nickname after

condemning between 4,000 and 5,000 political prisoners to execution: the Death Committee. Ebrahim Raisi was a pivotal member of the Death Committee, and his actions throughout the history of the Islamic regime in Iran have had a profound impact on its politics.

Diversity Within Iran's Leadership

On June 12, 2013, two days before the election that paved the way for Hassan Rouhani to be the president, Ali Khamenei stated: "It is possible that some people—for whatever reason—do not want to support the Islamic Republic regime but obviously want to support their country. They should also vote. Everybody should vote and prove his presence...Our country has an enemy, an opponent...In world politics, you cannot defeat your enemy just by making him ashamed. No. The more you show weakness, the more he steps forward and becomes more shameless...We should make our choice and proceed based on the correct and wise view."

Khamenei's statement was unprecedented for at least two reasons: It acknowledged, for the first time, the patriotism of those Iranians who might be considered "anti-Islamic Republic" and who have been maligned as traitors by the regime's propaganda machine over the last thirty-five years. Furthermore, this acknowledgment reflected an implicit call to these citizens to go ahead and vote for Rouhani for his first term as president. On June 26, Khamenei once again expressed his appreciation for voters unsympathetic to the Islamic Republic:

"If anyone is not completely happy with the Islamic regime, but the country and its interests matter for him, he should also vote," Khamenei said. "Presumably some of those individuals have voted. What does this mean? This means that even those who do not advocate the regime trust it. They also know the regime of the Islamic Republic can protect and defend the country's interests and national dignity. The problem of some world governments is that they cannot defend their nations,

interests, and dignity against international pressures and greedy [enemies]. The Islamic Republic is solid and vigorous like a lion and can stand against its enemies and defend the interests of the nation...This is known even by those who possibly voted without believing in the regime...

According to some commentators, the conservative camp was splintered more than ever in Rouhani's first-term election—a situation that raised tensions within the Revolutionary Guard. Some factions supported Jalili, while others, including Qasem Soleimani, the late commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, backed Qalibaf. Even clerical-political organizations such as the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers (*Jame-ye Madrasin-e Howzeh Elmieh Qom*) experienced such a high degree of fragmentation that they failed to coalesce around and promote a single candidate. Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who heads the Supreme Council for the Association of Teachers, reported that the election discord left the association on the verge of a split.

The 2021 presidential election in Iran was very different from the 2013 presidential election in terms of public participation. More voters showed up in 2013 than in 2021 and the enthusiasm that propelled Rouhani to the presidency in 2013 was completely missing in 2021, when Raisi was elected. It also differed in other notable ways. This time, the government did not jam satellite television, block the Internet, or cut cell phone service on Election Day. None of the candidates raised the prospect of fraud, even as skeptics on both sides have, with possible justification, expressed suspicions that Rouhani received either more or less than the reported 50.67 percent. However credible these objections were, Rouhani won by the narrowest margin of any presidential candidate in the history of the Islamic Republic. Questions thus arise: Why didn't Khamenei, the IRGC, or other government forces intervene to stop a Rouhani victory, if indeed they did not favor such an outcome? And, if Rouhani was somehow their favorite, what might have sparked such a policy shift and what are the potential consequences?

Such mysteries about the vote point to the broader reality that decisionmaking within the Islamic Republic does not follow any conventional

model premised on either dictatorships or democracies. Nor does Iran's model and its guiding principle of *velayat-e faqih* fit traditional categories of government such as military authoritarianism, despotism, totalitarianism, autocracy, theocracy, or oligarchy. All this creates complications for any nation that must deal with Iran, including whether analysis should focus on actor or structure, context or conduct. Further roiling the discussion is that national elections take place roughly every two years, but in a system whose center of gravity is a Supreme Leader who holds a permanent job and is free from accountability. The best approach, given these variables, seems to be a focus on the interaction between political actors and systemic structures rather than emphasis on any one of them. Such an approach can be applied effectively not only to Khamenei's rule, but also to analyze the reign of his predecessor, whose extraordinary charisma and popularity enabled him to shape the politics of the first decade of the Islamic Republic.

Perhaps the most useful lesson one can draw from the last four decades is that every time the Islamic Republic's leaders have tried to unify the government and dissolve factionalism within the ruling elite, they have failed. Likewise, attempts to rein in diversity within the system have invariably created further crises, forcing the government to regularly sideline members and thus help spawn new political generations. By analogy, Khamenei has described this dynamic between the regime and its elements as "fall-off" (autumn) and "blossom" (spring). This shedding and renewal process has the effect of maintaining the "revolutionary" nature of the regime, with each new administration representing a revolt against its predecessor. Every president, in turn, aspires to found a new "tradition," reversing whatever precedents he inherits. As for Khamenei's personal rise, it reached a turning point in 1989, when at age fifty he became Supreme Leader. Khamenei was a cleric who lacked not only his forerunner's charisma but his religious and political credentials as well. At first, instituting changes required that Khamenei honor the interests of several other centers of power. But gradually, over more than three decades, he accumulated formidable centralized authority, aided by transformation of the IRGC's role in overseeing the country's politics and economy. He now enjoys the final say on many issues, especially when it comes to foreign policy and the nuclear issue.

Ironically, a leader once seen as an inadequate successor to Khomeini may now have accumulated more power than the first Supreme Leader, at least in some areas. Setting aside the notion of the Supreme Leader as omnipotent, certain realities and actors can affect his mindset and decisions. Until now, few studies have examined these contingencies with regard to either of Iran's Supreme Leaders. Practically speaking, a better understanding of the subtleties that drive the leader's actions and behavior can help U.S. and other world leaders craft a more effective approach to the regime, particularly in light of its emerging nuclear capability. Prominent in this discussion is the IRGC, a massive entity that comprises both a military force operating parallel to Iran's regular military (but better equipped) and a network with unique access to Iran's economic resources. It has the ability to affect the nation's politics in various ways. Ali Khamenei played a major role in developing the modern IRGC and transforming it from a military force into a religious, political, economic, and cultural complex. But the effects of infighting made it a less-than-perfect transformation. In general terms, the regime has failed to achieve its goal of remaining unified internally and popular in the eyes of the public. In a bid to retain power, leaders have shifted their political stances, with Khamenei himself sometimes engaging in this practice.

Once More to Mashhad

Khamenei's lifestyle, history, and characteristics may carry an air of inscrutability and omnipotence, but in reality, he has a complex psychology and worldview shaped by his upbringing and education in Mashhad, in north-east Iran, and his relationship with his family, particularly his father. An examination of these early influences can help today's analysts understand Khamenei's motivations, principles, and internal struggles. Born in 1939, Khamenei belongs to the religious and sociopolitical environment of Iran's first holy city. Prior to his birth, the city was occupied by the Russians, who once attacked the dome of Mashhad's holy shrine. Tensions from within were further stirred by Reza Shah Pahlavi's enactment of a dress code for clerics. At a protest at the Gohar Shad Mosque, in which the city's religious class

expressed their outrage over this policy, police opened fire, killing several demonstrators. Other checks on the religious class included the requirement that members of the clergy receive consent from qualified ayatollahs to wear the clerical uniform. In line with the shah's decree, and his general attempt to impose a strict bureaucracy on the clergy, endowment properties and assets (*awqaf*), previously under local religious and mercantile authority, were placed under government supervision. Many madrasas (religious schools) were decommissioned and converted into primary or high schools under the Ministry of Education.

In the minds of many, such moves confirmed Reza Shah's status as an anti-clerical, secularist ruler who was under Britain's thumb. Unsurprisingly, the shah's version of nationalism became associated with both colonialism and secularism. Ultimately, his resignation and exile were brought about after British and Soviet forces entered Iran in 1941. This invasion also contributed to a sharp economic decline in the country. The city's elite at the time could be divided roughly into four groups. The first consisted of apolitical clerics who were focused on rebuilding the clerical establishment and, toward this end, avoiding any conflict with a powerful government capable of destroying it. The second faction consisted of a young clerical minority who believed the government, backed by members of the Bahai faith and the West, was corrupt and that a fight against the government reflected a legitimate attempt to challenge the forces of secularism and colonialism. The third faction, composed of nationalist supporters of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq, had a critical view of the government and a tumultuous relationship with the clergy. Rounding out the elite factions was the fourth group: the leftists.

From this outline, one can see how Mashhad was fertile ground for groups all across the political spectrum. Despite the Soviet occupation of Mashhad, the Tudeh Party and the other factions forged a consensus based on an anti-Western, rather than anti-Soviet, worldview, with even the apolitical clergy joining this bloc. As the relative tolerance toward the occupying Soviets indicated, the anticolonialist sentiment in Mashhad was directed more toward the British and other Western powers than toward foreign intervention in general. Indeed, during a meeting with Vladimir Putin in

2000, Khamenei maintained that Iranians did not harbor any negative memories regarding Russia.

Khamenei's worldview contains elements of each of the ideologies represented in Mashhad—along with paranoia, xenophobia, and a conspiratorial mindset—but it hews closest to that of the second faction with its focus on government's corruption and its alliance with the Bahai faith. This group was first inspired by the anti-Reza Shah clerics in Mashhad who contested his policy on dress. Later, however, when the center for anti-shah activism shifted to Qom, led by Khomeini, young clerics in Mashhad followed the Qom leadership. In Mashhad's seminary—then, and even now—an irrational strain of thought predominated that considered pure Islamic teaching to be at odds with Greek and even Islamic philosophy. In such an environment, the study of Islamic philosophy was discouraged and seminarians were instructed to avoid the application of rational interpretations of religious texts. Instead, arcane sciences and ultra-conservative religious rituals were seen as having higher value.

Never a typical cleric, Khamenei lived, or wished to live, in two worlds: intellectual and clerical. On the first count, he studied Persian literature, implying an interest in entering intellectual circles, which then consisted of mostly writers and poets. But since he was a cleric, his devotion to the world of literary salons, which thrived on anti-clerical sentiments generated during the shah's time, seemed suspect not only to the salons but to traditional clerics as well, who also questioned the authenticity of his desire to join their ranks. Therefore, he had a foot in both the intellectual and clerical worlds without being fully recognized as a member of either.

Arguing against Khamenei's attempts to taste intellectual life was his father, a cleric himself who wanted his son to become a traditional cleric and avoid politics. Khamenei entered the seminary against his will, and when, as a young cleric, he left Mashhad for Qom to continue his studies at a larger and more important seminary, his father opposed him. Financial problems ultimately forced Khamenei to leave Qom, and he returned to Mashhad, his self-confidence eroded. Meanwhile, his older brother pursued a prosperous legal career in Tehran. Even before Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, Khamenei enlisted both Islamist and leftist propaganda to brand the shah's

regime a puppet of the West. He was heavily influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood theoretician Sayyid Qutb, for whom he translated a few books into Persian. And Marxism influenced him to the point that he even attempted to provide a revolutionary Marxist interpretation of certain Islamic theological notions.

Even after spending several years in the Qom seminary, however, Khomeini remained anonymous among Qom clerics. In Mashhad, he taught courses in Marxist-influenced Islamic ideology to a small group of young revolutionary clerics and nonclerics outside the seminary. His ties to the inner circle of revolutionary leaders were advanced by his relations with the Shariati family and with Khomeinist clerics, especially Rafsanjani, who was living in Tehran. Indeed, it was at Rafsanjani's suggestion that Khomeini, despite not knowing much about the younger cleric, chose Khomeini to be a member of the Revolutionary Council. During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini became increasingly argumentative with higher authorities, including Supreme Leader.

Khomeini also displayed a growing inability to make, or be accountable for, decisions. Mistrust of others has shaped his political character, and one outgrowth has been his policy of creating several parallel jobs with the same responsibility, with communication channels leading to him alone. Such practices have allowed him, as Supreme Leader, to maintain full authority without the burden of assuming full responsibility for his decisions. When in November 1979 Khomeinist students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Khomeini was evidently discomfited by the action, although he dared not oppose Khomeini publicly, because such a stance would have placed his own future political power at risk. As the revolution consolidated its position, however, Khomeini identified with the right wing, positioning himself against the political and economic policies of the leftist-Islamist faction, which then took a harder stance regarding relations with the West.

The leftist-Islamists, for their part, would later be supported by Khomeini on several issues, including the mass killing of prisoners in 1988, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the purchase of weapons from the United States (in the Iran-Contra affair), the dismissal of Khomeini deputy Hossein Ali Montazeri, and Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*. When Khomeini

became Supreme Leader, he bowed to political realities and reversed his position in such areas, so powerful were leftist ideas as a part of Khomeini's legacy.

Khamenei's Values

Khamenei began his tenure as the Supreme Leader with public displays of humility, but a closer look at his record shows deft attempts—notably through his political appointments—to aggregate power. While at first keeping his predecessor's appointees in their positions, he gradually began replacing them with his own picks, thereby establishing his personal network and consolidating his authority. He also built a bureaucracy for the Office of the Supreme Leader, allowing him to create altogether new positions and name appointees to them. Khamenei's appointments—from chief of the judiciary to the Friday prayer imams—reflected heavy favoritism toward a new generation of politicians, compared to the founding leader's embrace of the Islamic Republic's first generation. Indeed, Khamenei only tolerated members of the earlier generation if they acknowledged their inferiority to him.

Yet he needed to solve state-related issues through Islamic law and lacked the necessary religious legitimacy to do so, and thus formed a judicial board to devise legal solutions on such matters. The appointed member, which included his older brother Muhammad, had not been close to Khomeini or his ideology. The new Supreme Leader's efforts to distance himself from the ayatollahs associated with his predecessor were obvious. Even if ostensibly civilians or clerics, the new generation embraced by Khamenei came mainly from a military background. And, particularly in military and security affairs but in other areas as well, Khamenei demonstrated a penchant for micromanagement. Departing from his predecessor's practice of granting indefinite appointments, the new Supreme Leader tended to issue time-limited appointments and substantially restructure the organizations under these new appointees. Khamenei would thus eventually wield vast control over public and private life in Iran in the political, economic, clerical, philanthropic and cultural realms.

He was also preoccupied with details and appearances, going so far as to instruct his office on seating arrangements before meetings with clerics or officials. One of Khamenei's core values is "resistance" and firmness against pressure. From the very beginning of his leadership, he was determined to fight leftists, who were powerful under Ruhollah Khomeini, even as he accommodated some of their ideas and positions. In 1989, his first year in power, for example, Ali Khamenei appointed Muhammad Yazdi as chief of the judiciary despite opposition from Ahmad Khomeini, the late Supreme Leader's son, along with Ayatollah Abdul Karim Moussavi Ardebili and other influential leftists. In 1992, he maintained this policy by preventing leftists from winning a majority of seats in parliamentary elections. In 1995, the Supreme Leader demonstrated this value again when he stood by Ali Larijani, then head of state television and radio, after the broadcast of the documentary *Identity*, in which intellectuals were accused of being agents of Western intelligence services. The backlash from the accused stirred public sympathy, because there was a rash of killings of intellectuals around the same time. But perhaps just to show his resilience, Khamenei did not replace Larijani. The next year, he showed similar mettle during a large-scale corruption case involving the Janbazan and Mostazafan Foundation, headed by Mohsen Rafiqdoost. Among those implicated was Rafiqdoost's own brother, Morteza, who was arrested by the judiciary. Yet, faced with both public and elite pressure to remove Rafiqdoost from his position, Khamenei not only held steady but renewed Rafiqdoost's term for another five years. Acknowledging the corrupt acts of his first appointee to the foundation would have meant a loss of face.

For Khamenei, the term "resistance" also became a key word in discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran's nuclear program, and other major foreign policy issues. Khamenei's "resilience" extends to his near silence regarding his health conditions. He is known to have suffered from longtime depression, stomach problems, and from injuries caused by the June 1981 attempt on his life. Yet reports on these conditions are unreliable. In May 1991, he is known to have had surgery, although no details on the procedure are available. Iran's leaders have a long history of concealing health problems, dating to before the revolution. Muhammad Reza Shah kept his

grave cancer prognosis from family members and confidants until very late, as did Khomeini nearly a decade later.

Yet while some scholarly attention has now focused on the impact of the shah's illness on his decisionmaking, few studies have been devoted to Ayatollah Khomeini's health, even as details of his physical decline have emerged. For example, a Tehran magazine revealed recently that, in 1986, Khomeini suffered his second heart attack during the post-revolutionary period, leading doctors to believe he would not survive long. During his last three years as Supreme Leader, actual power fell to a handful of other individuals, including his son Ahmad, Rafsanjani, Ardebili, Khamenei, and Mir Hossein Mousavi. Such precedents suggest that were Khamenei to experience serious health problems, the public would not know about them until the very last moment.

Khamenei's Advisors

One of Khamenei's main accomplishments has been the bureaucratic reshaping of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Without a doubt, Khamenei himself has benefited from this effort. But the office, known as the House of the Leader (*Bayt-e Rahbar*), remains an obscure corner in Iranian politics, with little information available on who actually runs it. Since the 2005 election, speculation on this question has centered on Khamenei's second son, Mojtaba, who is also rumored to have gained power within the intelligence community and Basij militia. But much evidence suggests his influence has not diminished the role within the office of other individuals, such as Vahid Haghani, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, or Asghar Mir Hejazi.

Khamenei started forming his office the day he came to power. Yet he did not choose Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini loyalists or well-known political heavyweights. Rather, he chose friends who had consistently proved their loyalty to him. As his main office managers, he appointed Golpayegani and Hejazi, both former Ministry of Intelligence deputies under Mohammad Mohammadi Reishahri and, before that, members of the Islamic Revolution Committee. Others appointed to positions in Khamenei's office had worked

under him in the Ministry of Defense, the Islamic Republic Party, and the president's office. These handpicked appointees clearly indicated his preference for bureaucrats who would furnish him with information rather than political figures who would provide advice, suggesting Khamenei's perception of himself as the foremost political analyst and the most knowledgeable authority on political factions and trends.

The composition of Khamenei's office reflected his profound desire to maintain an air of neutrality and to avoid any sense that his staff might be tied to a particular political faction. For Khamenei, personal relationships have long trumped political affiliation, and three such relationships are worth mentioning. Khamenei's friendship with Gen. Muhammad Shirazi, the head of the military department in the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (*Rais-e Daftar-e Nezami-ye Farmandehiye Kol-e Qova*), can be traced to Khamenei's years in Rafsanjan, in Kerman province, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Shirazi's father, Hajj Assadollah Shirazi, was one of the wealthiest and most pious farmers in the village of Kashkouiye, located near Rafsanjan. His guests included many revolutionary clerics. During his frequent visits to Hajj Assadollah's home, Khamenei developed a rapport with his sons, especially Abbas, who went on to become a cleric and would, thanks largely to his relationship with Khamenei, serve in several positions following the revolution, including as head of the Office of War Propaganda and deputy of the Islamic Outreach Organization.

Ali Shirazi, another son of Hajj Assadollah, previously served as Khamenei's representative in the IRGC Navy and was recently appointed as Khamenei's Qods Force representative. He is the author of Khamenei's biography *Partovi az Khorshid* (A Ray of the Sun's Light) as well as *Sokhani-ye Samimaneh ba Rais Jomhour* (A Sincere Word with the President), a three-volume critique of former president Mohammad Khatami's reformist agenda. The Shirazi family's relationship with Khamenei gains further interest when one considers that the late Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani also comes from Kerman province and that he was likely introduced to Khamenei by the Shirazi family before the revolution.

Another of Khamenei's close friends is Ahmad Marvi, who also hails from Mashhad and was a student of ideological studies under Khamenei in the city

before the revolution. Around the same time, Khamenei befriended Ahmad's father and his older brother, Hadi, an important figure in Iran's judiciary and the son-in-law of former Guardian Council member Abu al-Qasem Khazali. Ahmad, for his part, was appointed deputy of clerical relations in the Supreme Leader's office a few months after Khamenei entered office.

The third personal relationship of interest is that between Khamenei and his bodyguard, Hossein Jabari, who has headed Khamenei's security since 1979, when Jabari was just eighteen years old. After the June 1981 attempt on Khamenei's life at the Abuzar Mosque, Jabari carried the injured Khamenei away on his back. Three-plus decades of this kind of devotion have allowed Jabari to become Khamenei's confidant. These examples show the preeminence of close relationships in Khamenei's office. He consults other officials as well. For example, on media-related issues, he relies on Ezzatollah Zarghami, head of state TV and radio. Yet despite engaging in such consultations, the Supreme Leader never suggests to these individuals that he fully trusts their judgments and strives to retain the impression that his ultimate decisions are his own.

In the hierarchy of forces influencing Khamenei, the clerical establishment holds a very low position, especially over the past decade. The clerics' impotence is largely a function of Khamenei's complete authority over the seminaries, with their vitality dependent on his funding and political support. Yet while the Supreme Leader shows minimal interest in clerics' views, he expresses concern about clerics' speech and actions, especially in the public sphere. A recent move away from theological Shiism and toward popular Shiism has also engaged Khamenei in the discussion on religion—on the side of popular Shiism, which emphasizes rituals rather than dogma. Khamenei therefore regards the clergy as managers of the sacred and overseers of ritual, rather than as sources of theological teaching. Illustrating this shift, every year visitors to the Jamkaran Mosque near Qom on the anniversary of the Mahdi's birth roughly equal those visiting Mecca on the Hajj.

As interest in theological debate has dimmed for the younger generations, the clergy has largely been tasked with running various government bureaus as well as mosques. Many Iranians differentiate between the "governmental

clergy” and the “independent clergy,” generally considering the former corrupt, both economically and politically, while respecting the latter. On his 2010 trip to Qom, Khamenei warned that such distinctions reflect an “enemy’s tactic [and] a wrong concept and accusation.” The Supreme Leader’s statement signifies the widespread nature of this perception. For their part, religious Iranians who are critics of the regime look to marjas, or grand ayatollahs such as Ali al-Sistani for political guidance. (Sistani, however, attempts to keep a low profile and not to publicly oppose Khamenei.) Khamenei usually trusts low-ranking clerics who have proved their loyalty to him more than he does high-ranking clerics—and, in line with his other preferences, the second generation of the Islamic Republic more than the first.

For instance, Khamenei trusts Haydar Moslehi much more than he did Mohammad Mohammadi Reishahri, who died in March 2022. Moslehi ascended the ladder of power strictly through Khamenei’s assistance, whereas Reishahri owed his political credentials to his father-in-law, Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, who formerly headed the Assembly of Experts and was very close to Khomeini. The current Supreme Leader’s advisors show the persistence of two trends: a preference for the second generation of the Islamic Republic over the first and an inclination to seek advice from friends who have been loyal over decades rather than from political operatives who might challenge his assumptions. Always prevalent in Khamenei’s calculus is the need to preserve and enhance his own power.

Khamenei vs. the Clergy

Before the Islamic Revolution, the clerical establishment enjoyed partial autonomy from the Iranian government and, in this capacity, wielded significant influence. But since 1979, that influence has steadily flagged as socio-religious and political authority have become conjoined. Khamenei has been a central agent in propelling this process, bringing clerics under state control through a bureaucratic effort that has fundamentally reshaped the role and character of the religious class within the state. Indeed, Khamenei’s

broad control over the clerics is outlined in his job description. In the post-revolutionary landscape, Iran's Supreme Leader is not only the head of the judiciary and the intelligence community, as well as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but also the head of the country's clerical establishment.

Given the risks associated with publicly opposing or criticizing the Islamic Republic, clerics have generally been reluctant to do so. This reluctance is related, in part, to the Supreme Leader's religious authority. In the early days of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini was declared a jurist unlike any other. This elite status, later applicable to Khomeini's successor, comes with a range of coercive instruments. Most notorious is an entity known as the earlier-discussed Special Court for Clerics, established in 1987, which works separately from the judicial system and whose head is appointed by the Supreme Leader. Since the founding of the Special Court, legal procedure has largely been disregarded in Iran and hundreds of clerics throughout the country have been imprisoned and executed. The Special Court operates under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader and does not follow the judicial procedures and laws holding sway in the rest of the country. Since its establishment, the court has become well known for its brutal and humiliating treatment of clerics of all ranks. Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari was one of many "tried" in this court. While he was accused of involvement in a military coup to overthrow the Iranian government and assassinate Khomeini, his real "crime" was attempting to challenge Khomeini's legitimacy as a ruling jurist. His dossier was ultimately closed but only after many of his followers and relatives were arrested or executed, and after Shariatmadari himself was paraded on state television after making a public "confession" and begging for Khomeini's pardon. He died under house arrest in 1986.

In addition to the court, the Islamic Republic has developed a range of mechanisms for enforcing its rule within the clerical establishment. The state's assumption of direct responsibility for the day-to-day management of clerical institutions, in particular, has fundamentally altered the clergy's access to financial resources. Relatedly, much of the property that previously belonged to Iran's traditional religious authorities has been confiscated and now is under the control of the Supreme Leader. For example, the House of Islamic Propaganda (*Dar al-Tabligh*), initially owned by Ayatollah

Shariatmadari, became a base for the Office for Islamic Propaganda (*Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami-e Qom*), the head of which is appointed by the Supreme Leader. Another instrument for government control over the clerics is the so-called Imam Jafar Sadeq 83 Independent Brigade, which consists of “guerrilla” clerics who wear a military uniform and a turban. The Brigade’s goal is to ensure that voices emerging from the seminaries echo the government line—and to repress voices that go astray. Another institution, the Statistical Office, listed as part of the Center for the Management of the Seminaries, acts on behalf of the Intelligence Ministry and monitors clerics in both their private and public lives. The Intelligence Ministry’s deputy on clerical affairs, as well as the Office of the Supreme Leader’s deputy on clerical relations, plays a similarly significant role in controlling the clergy through political and ideological means.

Under Khamenei, control over the seminaries has been greatly tightened. The Supreme Council for Seminaries was established in 1994 to regulate policy planning, seminary issues, and religious education, and to prevent “penetration of foreigners in seminaries and [protect] clerics against the influence of deviant currents and [create] a consulting center for guiding clerics.” The seminaries in Qom, Mashhad, and all other Iranian cities are administered by the Supreme Council for Seminaries, whose members must prove their absolute allegiance to the Supreme Leader before being appointed. According to the council’s charter, marjas who believe in the absolute authority of the ruling jurist (Supreme Leader) can also participate in the appointment or dismissal processes for the council’s members. In practice, this scenario leaves the Supreme Leader as the only real authority with the power to shape the council in his own favor.

Khamenei’s centralization of the seminary bureaucracy has entailed a dramatic shift from a traditional order based on oral culture to a modern, digitized system that exerts control over clerics’ private lives, public activities, and political orientation. Whether a cleric believes in the legitimacy of velayat-e faqih or is a direct beneficiary of the Islamic Republic is irrelevant: all clerical affairs must now run within the framework defined by Khamenei. For instance, marjas once had their own independent registry office for depositing clerics’ monthly payments, giving them the freedom

to pay whatever amount to whomever they wanted. Now they must follow the guidelines of the Supreme Council for Seminaries, which are computerized and centralized through the Center for the Management of Qom Seminaries. Payments by marjas to clerics, as well as any payments from one religious institution to another, ultimately require approval from the Supreme Leader's representatives.

The Center for the Management of Qom Seminaries also maintains a comprehensive database of the marjas' properties, assets, and income, information the Supreme Leader uses to manage the marjas' financial activities. Furthermore, while clerics could previously study or teach in seminaries without bureaucratic permission, seminaries are now governed by a more restrictive, university-like arrangement. Even those marjas who do not depend directly on the government must comply financially with the government's system. One prominent such example is Ayatollah Sistani of Najaf, Iraq, who has always enjoyed considerable autonomy from the Iranian theocracy and who represents a comparatively more traditional view of Shiism. This influential cleric cannot operate his office or manage his religious-financial network within Iran (and, in some cases, in other countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon and Syria) without cooperating with the Iranian government.

The financial story has another dimension as well. Before the revolution, ordinary clerics depended on marjas for their livelihood. Today, however, most clerics also receive financial support through institutions run by the state and the Supreme Leader. In order to demonstrate his financial and religious supremacy, Khamenei pays much higher salaries to clerics than the marjas do. Yet even the Supreme Leader's salary added to the marjas' payments would not amount to a sufficient income for a cleric. In reality, clerics earn the larger proportion of their money through their work for governmental or semi-governmental institutions or their involvement in various kinds of business. While most marjas supposedly rely on the proceeds from religious taxes that they assess, the Supreme Leader presides over the wealthiest and most profitable economic institutions in Iran, such as the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, the Imam Reza Shrine, and affiliated entities.

Today, religious marjas combined provide for only a small percentage of the clerics' financial needs. By contrast, the government—and Khomeini himself—is primarily in charge of financial issues in Shia seminaries, especially in Iran. As such, the economic role and authority of the marja has been systematically reduced, just as the Islamic Republic's authority and power over Shia financial networks has been enhanced. In just the city of Qom, the seminaries are accompanied by more than four hundred religious institutes that engage in Islamic research or propaganda. Dozens of similar institutes operate in cities like Mashhad and Isfahan, joined by community centers and libraries, all of which form a network established to propagate ideology favored by the republic. Of course, all must cooperate with the Supreme Council for Seminaries. The government actively uses these entities to promote ideas conducive to its goals while sidelining those ideas and religious teachings that are not.

This system has ultimately allowed the Islamic Republic to dominate the intellectual life of Iran's clerical establishment, especially since the deaths of the grand ayatollahs Abu al-Qasem Khoei, Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, and Shahab al-Din Marashi Najafi, all eminent scholars who opposed many aspects of Ayatollah Khomeini's agenda. The role of traditional centers of religious authority—which operated as a religious and political check on the newly formed hierocracy—correspondingly went into steep decline, and a younger generation of clerics reared in Khomeini's republic came to occupy positions of great religious and political influence. For clerics in general, whether on the government payroll or not, a wide array of amenities and privileges are available. The government underwrites a hefty budget for religious institutions, making today's Iranian clerical establishment the wealthiest of any period in history. Well-connected clerics and Marjas within the Islamic Republic are involved in lucrative business deals, receive exclusive governmental benefits, and can borrow large amounts of money from banks without sufficient guarantees for repayment.

Many charities owned by marjas in Iran and high-ranking clerics engage in business through corrupt dealings with the government. Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* requires that all clerics be subject to the orders of the Supreme Leader/jurist, just as any other Shia worshipper would be.

This doctrine is premised on the view that the ruling jurist is the heir of the Prophet Muhammad and the representative of the infallible Hidden Imam, benefiting from all their divine authorities. The Supreme Leader thus has the authority over matters beyond sharia and the country's constitution, granting him—at least in principle, though there are always limits in practice—enormous powers over society in general and the hierocracy in particular. According to Khomeini, expediency and government interest overrule all Islamic laws, which justifies the ruling jurist's authority over matters beyond sharia or the constitution. In this vein, some have contended that marjas cannot use religious taxes without the approval of the ruling jurist. In addition, it has been argued that “fatwas issued by marjas that deal with public issues can come into practice only after the approval of the ruling jurist.” Within the Islamic Republic, what an individual jurist believes or the quality of his scholarship is of little significance. What matters most is how, within the structure of the hierocracy, the ruling jurist chooses to define his relationship to other individual jurists. In other words, jurists do not deal with the Supreme Leader and his office as a fellow or even as a superior member of a religious community, but instead as the head of an expansive military-economic-political corporation.

Rewards are abundant for members of this corporation who are in good standing. The very constitution of the Islamic Republic is based on discrimination that favors clerics. For instance, the head of the government, the head of the judiciary, all the members of the Assembly of Experts, the six clerical members of the Guardian Council, the minister of intelligence, and several other positions must be mujtahids, or jurists. A secular democratic government that removed all discrimination, including policies favoring clerics, would not be an ideal government for the overwhelming majority of jurists and clerics, whether they like the existing political system or not. What the Iranian people might consider an ideal alternative to the current system is not so idyllic for most clerics. The Islamic Republic has systematically sought to deprive clerics of their independence and tarnish their reputations. Despite this fact, the Islamic Republic is still widely viewed as the most favorable government for clerics in the history of Islam. Ayatollah Khamenei's relationship with the clerical establishment, therefore, contains

a certain paradox in which religious freedom is suppressed and yet members of the clergy are rewarded for their compliance with established expectations. More broadly, this relationship shows how clerics' religious views have been marginalized in favor of their utility within the state's increasingly sophisticated apparatus of control.

Khamenei vs. the President's Office

Among the most intriguing relationships for the Supreme Leader, and a highly pertinent one given the election of Ebrahim Raisi, is that with Iran's president. Before the June 2021 election, Khamenei had served alongside four presidents, each of whom spent eight years in office. Given the resilience of Khamenei's leadership, one can deduce that he has successfully checked the influence wielded by the president. And when the president's power is uncomfortably ascendant, the Supreme Leader and his peers are not beyond hinting at a change in the Islamic Republic's entire system of government.

The relationship between the Supreme Leader and the president tends to be dichotomous, as each figure's legitimacy issues from a different source: the president's from nationwide elections and the Supreme Leader's from the divine. The president holds office for four years and is limited to two sequential terms, while the Supreme Leader's position is permanent. As such, tensions between these two leaders are inevitable. Historically, to be president of Iran is not to be in a favorable position. The first president of the Islamic Republic, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, received 78 percent of the vote only to see his authority challenged by Ayatollah Khomeini, who expected Bani Sadr to be a simple facilitator of his and the clerical establishment's aims for the country. After a tension-filled year and a half, Bani Sadr was dismissed by Khomeini. Bani Sadr succeeded in fleeing the country, as did many of his associates, but still others were either killed or imprisoned by the Islamic Republic. Bani Sadr died in exile in France in 2021.

In the subsequent presidential election, the victor was Muhammad Ali Rajai, an Islamist with ties to Khomeini. But Rajai's fate was even bleaker than that of his predecessor: just a few months into his tenure, he was

assassinated, along with Prime Minister Muhammad Javad Bahonar, in a bombing against the prime minister's office. This event paved the way for Khamenei to become the first cleric to be president of the Islamic Republic. But even his power over eight years in office was reduced to near-ceremonial status, owing to the dominant executive role played by Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi. Even in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, Khamenei's position was secondary to that of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Supreme Leader's deputy as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. And in 1988, when thousands of Iranian political prisoners were murdered, Khamenei was unaware of what even happened, according to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who protested the government's role in the massacre.

After Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989, his clashes with the country's presidents were different in character from those of Khomeini, largely because he lacked his predecessor's charisma and religious and political credentials. As a result, Khamenei was compelled to devise a sophisticated system in which the president's power was inherently limited. And indeed, over time, this system has had the effect of gradually reducing the president's power and capabilities to the benefit of the Supreme Leader. As such, the presidential institution has been weakened, along with its prospects to serve as a strong democratic counterweight to the religious leadership.

Until Raisi's election, the four presidents to serve alongside Khamenei were Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani. Each case testifies to Khamenei's ability to keep a president in power while simultaneously weakening him by allowing the country's judiciary and intelligence apparatus to accuse members of the president's circle of economic or moral corruption, or of connection with opposition movements or Western powers. Khamenei has also used his power to prevent the president from achieving his stated goals during his presidential campaign, thus undermining his credibility. When Khomeini died, the general impression both inside and outside Iran was that his successor was less anti-American than his predecessor and that, along with Rafsanjani, he could open a new chapter in the Islamic Republic's history. Of course, the share of power held by the two was hardly equal. Even though the

position of prime minister was abolished in the revised constitution of 1989, apportioning more authority to the president, the new Supreme Leader took immediate steps to consolidate his own power. During Rafsanjani's second term, which began in 1993, Khamenei began using the various institutions over which he exercised control to pressure Rafsanjani's government either directly or indirectly. Pro-Khamenei groups, ranging from the Basij militia to various conservatives, were enlisted to criticize Rafsanjani's cultural and economic policies, weakening his position and harming his popularity.

Rafsanjani ultimately struck back at these attempts to undermine his position by allying with reformists in support of Mohammad Khatami as his successor in 1997, against Khamenei's obvious support for his rival, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri. These reformists, who came to embody a modern, pro-Western Iran, had previously been hardline leftists but were transformed by their eight years of political exile, brought about by Khamenei himself. Resentment from Iranians over the government's oppressive policies had largely driven the shift. Although at first stunned by the rejection, Khamenei and his allies soon took action. They paralyzed the Khatami government by shuttering newspapers, closing the political space, suppressing students, killing intellectuals, and persecuting government officials such as the powerful technocratic Tehran mayor, Gholam Reza Karbaschi. Khatami's exceptional popularity did not help him retain influence in either foreign or domestic politics.

Following Khatami's two terms, Khamenei demonstrated his potency by enabling the 2005 victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an almost unknown candidate. Ahmadinejad's election was intended to sideline both the reformists led by Khatami and the technocrats led by Rafsanjani. Meanwhile, Khamenei decided to take control of Iran's nuclear policy, which from 1989 to 2005 had been determined by consensus among the political elite. In coopting the nuclear file, Khamenei needed both to portray previous policies as ineffective and to present an alternative policy for the future. And he believed Ahmadinejad would be a good fit to carry out this plan. But for Khamenei, picking Ahmadinejad would turn out to be costly. The new president not only ultimately failed to align himself with Khamenei, he also began promoting a new nationalist, anti-clerical agenda, effectively using

Khamenei's resources to challenge the Supreme Leader's authority and to establish his own economic network and sphere of influence.

Distribution of Wealth

When Ahmadinejad entered office, he provided the IRGC, the clerical establishment, and all other foundations and organizations under Khamenei with unprecedented economic privileges, as an attempt to repay his debt to the Supreme Leader for bringing him to power. This included allocating hefty budgets in their favor and awarding big contracts without a bidding process or observance of standard government procedure. However, starting in 2009, Ahmadinejad began pulling back from his financial favoritism, a shift rooted in the president's need to establish an independent power center and to build up his own financial network. After issuing permission to create several private banks, however, Ahmadinejad drew objections from his more conservative critics that he was failing to follow proper legal procedure.

Yet the spillover economic activities associated with private banks, including their affiliated companies, real estate investments, and management of imports and exports, helped create a new financial sphere of influence for the president and his close advisor, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai. The banks would spawn more controversy still. Critics alleged that several figures who obtained permission to open the banks had received millions of dollars in loans, often from public banks, that they had failed to repay. For example, in 2011, the Iranian judiciary accused Mah Afarid Khosravi of engaging in corruption to the tune of \$3 billion—the largest such corruption charge in the history of the Iranian economy. Seven banks were implicated, and the license of the private Aria Bank was revoked. Its president, Amir Mansour Aria, was arrested. Many speculated that members of Ahmadinejad's circle, including Mashai and former vice president Muhammad Reza Rahimi, may have been involved, but were spared a court appearance at Khamenei's request in order to save face for the Islamic Republic.

A pivotal moment in the escalating tensions between the Supreme Leader and the president occurred on April 17, 2011, when Ahmadinejad dismissed

Intelligence Minister Haydar Moslehi from his position. Moslehi had close ties to both Khamenei and the military establishment, and Khamenei asked the president to reverse his decision, a request Ahmadinejad ignored. When Khamenei was forced to send the minister a letter directly asking him to reassume his position, the president demonstrated his apparent frustration by staying home and refusing to attend cabinet meetings for twelve days. It was only after Khamenei sent him threatening messages that Ahmadinejad resumed his work in the president's palace.

Yet Ahmadinejad persisted in his opposition to Moslehi, dismissing him on June 12, 2011, from the Council for Money and Credit, the main body in charge of economic policy planning. Some critics saw these moves as reflecting Ahmadinejad's bid to create his own financial empire without any accountability before the law. In reality, Ahmadinejad was seeking to extricate himself from his financial dependence on Khamenei's camp and the IRGC. In the end, Ahmadinejad seems to have believed that he needed Khamenei to rise to power but that reliance on the Supreme Leader was hampering his ability to maintain power. Political self-reliance would not be possible without economic self-reliance. In July 2011, Ahmadinejad went on the offensive, accusing the IRGC of smuggling legal and illegal goods through the country's key ports. The president thus proved that he was willing to target the Supreme Leader's financial resources and challenge his economic preeminence. Ahmadinejad took aim at individuals "connected to the network of masters of power and influence," who he claimed were selfish, immoral, and greedy, and who wanted to gain wealth by any means, "even if that wealth is haram."

Rising Factionalist

Khamenei's initial motivation for backing Presidents Raisi and Ahmadinejad was at least twofold. Not only was he seeking to marginalize the first generation of the Islamic Republic, along with reformists and technocrats, but he also wanted to forge a kind of unity between the presidency and clerical leadership, which had previously been split. In Khamenei's version of unity,

the president would be a loyal and subservient figure who both guided a democratically legitimate institution to serve the interests of the Supreme Leader and, of course, would never challenge the Supreme Leader's authority. Raisi has been a devoted follower of Khamenei so far and has delivered and sometime over-delivered on what was expected of him. But Ahmadinejad did challenge the Supreme Leader's authority, and he invoked his democratic legitimacy to this end. In his 2012 Nowruz message, he implicitly warned Khamenei not to interfere in the coming presidential election. The dynamic between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad ultimately damaged both.

Ahmadinejad's mismanagement and arrogance provoked tensions with other branches of the government, forcing Khamenei to intervene in areas from which he would typically keep his distance, such as the economy. Khamenei was also compelled to assert on several occasions that only he was authorized to make decisions on foreign policy and the nuclear issue. Muhammad Emami Kashani, Tehran's Friday prayer imam, echoed such statements, proclaiming that all questions associated with U.S.-Iran relations should be left to the Supreme Leader and not discussed by presidential candidates. The pre-election statements by Rafsanjani on May 5, 2013, evinced an awareness of the risks of a contentious rapport between the president and Supreme Leader. In response to student requests that he run, he said, "I will not run for election without [the Supreme Leader's] approval because if he does not agree, the result would be counterproductive." Such a statement reflected Rafsanjani's belief in the ultimate power of Khamenei and the inevitable failure of any president who seeks to propagate differing views on major policies. The Supreme Leader's stance on presidential power, meanwhile, has generally become less permissive over the past three decades. During the Rafsanjani years, the Supreme Leader had not fully consolidated his power, but both Khatami and Ahmadinejad complained about their limited authority. President Khatami sent a bill to the Majlis aimed at expanding the president's authority, but the Guardian Council rejected it. Khamenei, to the contrary, believed the president had too much power—enough perhaps to put his own authority at risk.

On October 16, 2011, Khamenei said, "Today our [political] system is presidential. That said, people directly elect a president. So far, it has been

a good way. If we feel in the near or distant future—probably not in the near future—that instead of a presidential system, a parliamentary system works better—as in some countries—that could be okay; the Islamic Republic can change this geometric line to another.” Around the same time, Hamid Reza Katouzian, Tehran’s representative in the Majlis, said supportively, “Recently, some political theoreticians arrived at a theory. Our country is blessed by [God’s gift of] velayat-e faqih and the Supreme Leader. Therefore, there is no need for a president in the country.” In the fall of 2011, Rafsanjani implicitly criticized Khamenei’s statement by saying, “Abolishing the people’s elected president will weaken the republican nature of the regime.”

In March 2013, the debate over a presidential versus a parliamentary system continued in a session of the Assembly of Experts, as expressed to the Rasa News Agency by Sayyed Abdul Hadi Hosseini Shahroudi, the assembly’s representative from Golestan province. A shift to a parliamentary system would require amending the constitution, which in turn could only be effective after a referendum. Given the political situation, in which the government was seeking to avoid unnecessary and possibly crisis-inducing elections and in which elites were increasingly struggling to reach internal consensus, the costs of amending the constitution might have been perceived by the regime as too great. But the very fact that Khamenei voiced an implicit wish to abolish the people’s elected president reveals his frustration with the system and the president’s ability to challenge him.

Khamenei vs. Political Institutions

Just as Khamenei has intensified his interventions with the president over the past three-plus decades, he has increasingly intervened in the activity of other political institutions, including parliament. This has been the case despite an early complaint, in 1989, by the predominantly leftist Majlis over Khamenei’s intervention in its affairs. He asserts his priorities and redlines not only through the Guardian Council but also by sending direct messages, sometimes written but more often verbal, to the Majlis speaker. This activity underscores both the breadth of the Supreme Leader’s influence in state

affairs and the blurring of lines between the supposedly theocratic and legislative wings of Iran's leadership. A parliament member, for example, recently revealed that without Khamenei's direct instruction, parliament would not have voted for several of Ahmadinejad's proposed ministers in 2009. And when parliament attempted to impeach the minister of labor and social welfare, the Supreme Leader dictated in a letter that the impeachment should not go forward.

On December 6, 2012, Majlis speaker Ali Larijani stated in the ninth Majlis (2012–16) that the legislative body tries to “take the path of the late imam—which is the straight path—and follow the words of the Supreme Leader...The ninth Majlis is committed to the obedience of the Supreme Leader and the general policies designed by him.” Correspondingly, in a meeting in early 2013, the Supreme Leader offered detailed solutions for the country's economic crisis to both the cabinet and the Majlis. The SNSC, which lately has extended its reach into the domestic and foreign policy realms, has given the Supreme Leader another powerful tool to advance his agenda. As outlined in the 1989 revision of the Iranian constitution, this council consists of the president (its nominal head), the Majlis speaker, the chief of the judiciary, the president's deputy on planning and strategic supervision, the chief of staff of the armed forces, the commander-in-chief of the army, the IRGC commander-in-chief, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of intelligence, and the minister of interior. Other ministers may be invited to the council's meetings if the subject matter requires their expertise. Given that the intelligence, interior, and foreign affairs ministers are usually selected by the Supreme Leader and not the president, that leaves only two democratically elected members on the council: the president and the Majlis speaker. The rest rely on Khamenei for their authority.

The council, according to the constitution, is supposed to design defense and security policies within the framework of policies defined by the Supreme Leader; coordinate all political, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic efforts related to defense security measures; and use the country's capabilities to respond to internal and external threats. The council has no agenda independent from the will and policies of the Supreme Leader, who usually is represented by the council's secretary. The secretary's responsibilities

include leading nuclear negotiations, reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, and briefing the president at random. An earlier chapter discussed the dismissal by Ayatollah Ruhollah of his then deputy, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri.

Comparatively speaking, the council wielded some influence over Khamenei until 2005. For example, the suspension of uranium enrichment in 2004 was not Khamenei's idea—and he later expressed public regret over the move. And when, in 1998, the Taliban killed several members of the Iranian consulate in Herat and some IRGC commanders asked for Khamenei's permission to attack Afghanistan in response, the council successfully convinced Khamenei that the move might have dangerous ramifications for Iran. But since 2005, Khamenei has tried to cleanse the council and make it utterly devoted to his agenda. Saeed Jalili, a former intelligence official who ran unsuccessfully in the 2013 presidential election, and Ali Baqeri, a former deputy of intelligence, are close confidants of his who entered the council to take over the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, as the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany are known. They are devoted to implementing Khamenei's agenda without any of their own and, in the process, to undermining the authority of the president and other members of the council.

In his 2011 book, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, Hassan Rouhani attempts to prove that decisions made during his 2003–5 tenure as nuclear negotiator were coordinated with and approved by the Supreme Leader, whom he quotes praising his management. Apparently, his book was a response to attacks on Iran's nuclear policy under Rafsanjani and Khatami. Those policies were criticized as ineffective by not only Ahmadinejad but also Khamenei. In a July 24, 2012, speech, the Supreme Leader said:

Regarding the nuclear issue, at a time when we cooperated with them and backed down...—this really happened, although we learned a lesson from it—they advanced so much that I said...that if they continued like that, I would have to step in personally. And that was what I did. I had to step in. These things are not my responsibility.

On July 30, 2012, after Khamenei disclaimed responsibility for the previous nuclear policy, Abdulvahed Mousavi Lari, the interior minister under Khatami, said to the Fars News Agency: “The enrichment [of uranium] and nuclear issues—from their inception until they caused problems with the West—were under the direct management of the Supreme Leader.”

Under Khatami, Lari continued, the interior minister himself was excluded from the committee in charge of the nuclear program, which reported to Khamenei—and “things were done by his approval.” All the same, arguments pitting the previous and present nuclear negotiators against each other continued. On May 7, 2013, Ali Baqeri, the deputy on international affairs for the SNSC and a top nuclear negotiator, described the former negotiation team’s achievements as harmful to the country’s interests and said Iran could not return to that era. “Unfortunately,” he said, “[Rouhani and others] attribute all these failures unjustly to the high officials, especially the Supreme Leader.” Baqeri continued: “In his book, Mr. Rouhani mentions that Iran had ten redlines before the Paris negotiations but that only three of them were considered and accepted by the Europeans. How come that former team attributes its failure to the high officials of the regime?” There is probably a grain of truth in both Rouhani’s and Baqeri’s assessments. Although Khamenei may not have been happy with the decisions of Rouhani, Rafsanjani, or Khatami on nuclear negotiations, he was initially not in a position to challenge them.

Only after Khamenei succeeded in shunting Rafsanjani and Khatami to the realm of domestic politics did he take over the nuclear policy himself and form a loyal negotiation team devoted to implementing his favored policy. Khamenei’s relationship to the Expediency Council, initially designed to mediate differences between the Guardian Council and the Majlis but in truth a tool of the Supreme Leader, is similar to that with the SNSC and the nuclear negotiators. That is, Khamenei exercises substantive control but maintains some degree of latitude in the event he wants to distance himself from a given decision. Lacking independent authority, the Expediency Council represents Khamenei’s interests when deciding whether bills approved by the parliament but rejected by the Guardian Council serve the regime’s interests and therefore should be ratified. The Expediency Council

also devises general policies of the state that go into effect once signed by Khamenei. Over the last twenty-five years, Rafsanjani's power as chairman of the Expediency Council has declined gradually and been filled by radical conservative elements. Particularly during Ahmadinejad's presidency, tensions between the president's team and Rafsanjani almost brought the council to complete dysfunction.

Khamenei helped stoke these tensions, and on June 19, 2009, he sided explicitly with the president: "I have various differences of opinion with Hashemi [Rafsanjani], which is natural...Since the election of 2005, there were differences of opinion between him and the president. This continues today [and the] president's opinion is closer to mine." Notable components of the split include Ahmadinejad's refusal for several years to attend the council's meetings. In 2012, rumors circulated that Rafsanjani would be replaced as chairman by another appointee, but the rumors did not come to fruition.

These examples illustrate how Khamenei relishes his ability to assert his influence throughout the national discourse, including in institutions such as the SNSC. His reach extends to political appointments and acts of censure. But he is equally keen to maintain a measure of deniability, showing once again the extent to which political fortitude—and survival—motivate his actions. It is worth mentioning that on September 5, 2013, Rouhani tasked the Foreign Ministry with handling nuclear negotiations. As foreign minister, Mohammad Zarif explained to reporters in September, "The policies and decisions on [the] nuclear issue will be made in the Supreme National Security Council, but negotiations with international parties will be done by [the Foreign Ministry]. Based on necessit[y], the Foreign Ministry is authorized to take appropriate strategies and tactics for negotiations." In this arrangement, the SNSC still holds considerable power to shape nuclear policy and determine the direction of the talks.

Khamenei's Relationship with the IRGC

Of all Khamenei's relationships with Iran's institutions, the most intricate is that with the IRGC, and particularly with its Qods Force, which operates outside the country. Over the past three-plus decades, Khamenei has transformed the IRGC from a military body into a military, political, economic and cultural complex with vast sway over the country's affairs. The Supreme Leader's interest is now in maintaining the IRGC's dominance while making sure his hegemony within the organization is not somehow undermined.

Khamenei's involvement with the IRGC might be dated to June 2, 1988, when—seeking to coordinate efforts, prevent infighting, and improve the wartime performance of the IRGC, regular military, and Basij militia—the Supreme Leader appointed Rafsanjani as his deputy in the armed forces. The Supreme Defense Council (later the Supreme National Security Council) was at the time headed by then president Khamenei and composed of figures who mainly advocated more aggressive policies, as opposed to Rafsanjani, who sought to end the war with Iraq. Khamenei's position in the council was rather minor, especially considering how his military role would evolve in later years. Although he headed the council, he did not have much authority and influence within the IRGC and, consequently, in the management of the armed forces. And during the war itself, Rafsanjani, along with Prime Minister Mousavi and Hossein Ali Montazeri, held the bulk of responsibility for the military.

Yet this did not mean Khamenei wanted a passive role. Rafsanjani's appointment itself had been prompted by a letter from Khamenei to his predecessor as Supreme Leader expressing the need for a single figure to run "all affairs regarding armed forces—regular military, IRGC, gendarmerie—including operations, logistics, human resources, administration, and so on." Khamenei apparently expected to receive the appointment himself, but Rafsanjani then had more credibility and influence within the armed forces. The years 1988 and 1989 were busy ones for Iran. The war with Iraq ended, the republic's founding leader died and was replaced, the constitution was amended to centralize executive power in the Office of the President and

abolish the prime ministry, and the IRGC was tasked by the political elite, led by Rafsanjani, with economic projects, including postwar reconstruction. For example, Khatam al-Anbia, an engineering arm of the IRGC, had allocated a tremendous budget for itself during the war. Now, it was enlisted in the reconstruction effort and became a major government contractor throughout the country. A few months after Khamenei became Supreme Leader, then president Rafsanjani resigned from his position as deputy commander of the armed forces and conceded his power to Khamenei. He did so under the gravely incorrect assumption that the war's end would mean a waning of the military role in Iranian society.

But Khamenei began refashioning the IRGC into an economic and political tool and a potent force that would be utterly loyal to him. The IRGC's economic and political activities were designed to occur entirely outside the scope of the government's executive branch. They also would not be accountable to any other government branch, whether economically, judicially, or politically. In a very critical statement in April 2013, Rafsanjani expressed his concerns about "the dominance of the military" in the country and its "expanding influence" over Iran's economy and politics. The "military" here could be seen as signaling the IRGC, and its wildly expanded national role.

Following his general strategy for holding power, Khamenei appointed both commanders and their deputies, with the goal to decentralize power and avoid empowering any one individual with undue influence. In many cases, deputies reported (and still report) directly to him rather than to their commanders. In this way, he has been able to control the organization through parallel channels. An example of this power is apparent in the Basij Mostazafan organization, which falls structurally under the IRGC but whose commander is appointed by Khamenei rather than the IRGC commander-in-chief. Khamenei also has clerics who serve as his representatives and monitor and report to him on the organization's politics. These representatives, who enjoy authority beyond their official roles, are also responsible for approving all promotions within the IRGC.

The IRGC's control over Iranian media is wide-ranging, from its unofficial jurisdiction over state TV and radio to print publications, cyberspace, and the country's religious centers, which serve as Iran's largest social network.

The foremost theme in the IRGC's propaganda is to promote Khamenei and the need for exclusive loyalty to him, rather than to any specific IRGC commander. The IRGC, which also controls the country's educational system, including its universities, recently extended its reach further by attempting to create seminaries to train clerics, an odd and unprecedented move. All these efforts are designed to advance Khamenei's agenda. Even outside Iran's borders, the government's propaganda is focused on boosting Khamenei rather than any other personality. It is hard to see how the IRGC rank and file and midlevel commanders could remain unaffected by this heavy focus on the Supreme Leader.

Because the IRGC perceives itself as a political-military entity different from the regular military, it believes in the legitimacy of intervention in Iranian politics. While reformists charge that such intervention is unhealthy, IRGC officials insist that this political dimension cannot be separated from the organization's identity. Every election season, IRGC activity in politics comes up for public debate. For example, in 2013, Gen. Masoud Jazayeri, an IRGC commander, accused "enemy" media of suggesting that the IRGC is not responsible for protecting the Islamic Revolution and therefore should not meddle in politics. "How is it possible," he said, "for an individual or an organization that regards itself as the guardian of a living and dynamic entity called the Islamic Revolution...to be indifferent toward politics?"

Invariably, this politicization has intensified factionalism within the IRGC. But no evidence suggests any IRGC commander is currently in a position to challenge Khamenei's authority—an authority that dates to his efforts to "cleanse" the organization of the old guard, including pro-Montazeri and leftist elements, and his practice of appointing new commanders.

Rouhani, unlike previous presidents, avoided seeking to dominate the IRGC or to challenge its authority over Iran's political and economic life. Instead, his approach was to refashion the IRGC's functions by appealing to the Supreme Leader—whose role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces encompasses the IRGC—rather than undertaking independent initiatives. Most especially, Rouhani sought to argue to Khamenei that IRGC monopolies weaken the economy and that allowing more room for private-sector growth would ultimately improve the country's health. Rouhani's early efforts to

curb the IRGC's economic role yielded some successes, and the IRGC did not view these gestures as a threat. In this sense, the organization evidently remained within boundaries set by Khamenei, in contrast to the public objections the Guards often voiced to Ahmadinejad's moves. As for Rouhani and Khamenei's shared motives, they may well have been economic rather than political. For one thing, IRGC management of economic projects has often been unprofitable for the government. In addition, IRGC links to firms have created easy targets for Western sanctions and even spurred questions about the regime's legitimacy. Rouhani, therefore, convinced the Supreme Leader that a reduction in the IRGC's economic activities could lead to improved economic management, a lifting of sanctions, and the return of foreign investment, thereby improving the economy, an issue about which Rouhani cared deeply.

But a reduced IRGC economic role could only be sustained in the event of successful nuclear talks. (When the United States pulled out of the deal in 2018—wrecking the prospect of eased sanctions and foreign investment—Khamenei once again relied on the IRGC in the realm of economics.) At the same time, he and Rouhani seemed to work together to keep the IRGC both loyal to the Supreme Leader and away from nuclear talks. In a 2013 speech to IRGC commanders, Khamenei discussed “heroic flexibility” in diplomacy, a reference widely interpreted as showing his approval for Rouhani's policy to negotiate with the West over the nuclear crisis. Just a day before Khamenei's statement, Rouhani himself addressed the IRGC commanders, saying, “The IRGC should understand politics very well but should not intervene in it because it belongs to the whole Iranian nation.” The implied criticism, from both Rouhani and Khamenei, was of IRGC support for any specific political faction. Yet Rouhani's statement must be considered as that of an insider. He had worked in the military and security apparatus of the Islamic Republic since its inception. In operating through Khamenei, Rouhani helped the Supreme Leader achieve his goal of preventing the IRGC from attaining unchecked power, while Rouhani avoided tangling with the IRGC over the details or direction of the nuclear talks.

Later that year, when hardliners outside the IRGC characterized Rouhani's negotiation team harshly, Khamenei bluntly defended the negotiators: “No

one should consider our negotiating team as compromisers; they are our children and the children of the revolution. They have a difficult mission, and no one should seek to weaken an official who is on duty.” Whatever the recent developments, the IRGC will remain a key player in Iran’s power structure for the foreseeable future. The organization is a standout asset for Khamenei. Whether a charismatic leader will emerge within the IRGC and thereby change the power calculus is always low-hanging fruit for commentators. But for now, Khamenei’s model of ruling through strategic appointments, timely acts of “resistance,” and opportunistic public statements remains intact.

Expediency as a New Feature

Ayatollah Khomeini was the first to bring up the concept of “expediency” in Shia political thought. In classical Shia theology, undermining the requirements of the religious texts for the public interest even temporarily was illegal. But according to Khomeini’s political theory, what a ruling jurist sees as achieving expediency for the regime reflects God’s commandments. In a revision of the Islamic Republic’s constitution, the Supreme Leader formed the Expediency Council, a body discussed in earlier chapters whose main duty is to veto decisions made by the Guardian Council, which examines the parliament’s adopted bills through the lens of the constitution and Islamic law. In other words, the Expediency Council, under the Supreme Leader, has the authority to overrule Islamic law or the constitution if it considers them against the interests of the regime. Khomeini stated, “Safeguarding the regime is a religious duty above all duties.”

Thus, the theory of the guardianship of the jurisprudent is not designed to implement Islamic law but rather to give legitimate authority to the jurist to ignore it. This was exactly the reason behind the opposition of many Shia jurists to Khomeini’s theory. They believed that it would offer him a religious justification for ignoring religious law. Based on this theory, Khomeini legalized many practices that were religiously illegal before the revolution, from the participation of women in elections to trade in caviar. According to Khomeini’s interpretation of Islam, there are no core principles. The imam and his representatives are the criteria themselves.

Khomeini not only legalized many religiously illegal acts but also injected religion into many issues that were not previously subject to religious legislation. For example, respecting driving rules is not a religious matter, but the founding leader issued a fatwa stating that it was. Paying taxes to the

government, which was religiously illegal before the revolution, became a religious duty afterward. Iranian political leaders following the revolution, especially in the past three decades, have been more concerned about concrete and practical interests than abstract or absolute Islamic ideals. Even the political, economic, and military investments for supporting the “Palestinian cause” or “Islamic cause” should not be understood as a policy merely driven by abstract religious motives. Rather, it has to be contextualized within the historical and political conditions that shape Tehran’s behavior. Essentially, Iranian leaders are pursuing their own interests before God’s interests.

Conclusive evidence indicates that the Iranian regime is trying to deepen and expand its power in the region by any means possible, and that religion is only a tool for justification, not a binding code. Iranian leaders, whether in theory or practice, have shown that in a conflict between the interests of government and religion, they will stand with government. But the establishment’s understanding of the Islamic texts has provided it with the ability to justify every decision with Islamic ideology. During the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran used all available elements, icons, and concepts from Islam to justify the effort and recruit people for the military. Furthermore, Iran’s compliance with the 1988 UN ceasefire resolution, which was supported by Khomeini, proved that Islamic ideology could justify both war and peace. In fact, one of the most important consequences of that ceasefire was overwhelming doubt regarding the honesty of the leader. This suspicion about his true belief in Islamic and revolutionary ideals led to unhappiness among the war generation because Khomeini promised victory and considered it God’s promise to the people.

Identifying and Neutralizing the Western Enemy

The current Supreme Leader tends to view politics in terms of provisional friends and permanent enemies. By branding someone an enemy, in Khomeini’s view, one can more easily fashion one’s own identity. He thus understands politics as Ivan Ilyin, the twentieth-century Russian philosopher and ideologue, defined it: “the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy.” He

also tends toward threat inflation, which is characterized by Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer as “an attempt to create concern for a threat that goes beyond the scope and urgency that a disinterested analysis would justify.” This includes an inflated threat in the form of the United States. The January 2020 killing of Qasem Soleimani only reinforced his belief that the United States and Iran cannot be reconciled.

Iran not only perceives the United States as a major enemy; it also believes that Washington views Iran as the ultimate global threat against which all efforts should be mobilized. The Islamic Republic’s leaders and ideological apparatus systematically suggest that Iran is at the heart of U.S. security and military policy planning. Islamic Republic leaders warn the Iranian people to ignore the seemingly benign rhetoric of the American people and instead listen to U.S. leaders who express the hidden American agenda. The general rule, whereby the Supreme Leader is the ultimate arbiter of ideological truth, applies here too: his analysis of the language of the “enemy” and diagnoses of its motivations should be recognized by others as fact. By presenting the United States as the foremost security threat, Iran’s rulers legitimize their efforts to adopt drastic security measures and further militarize the regime.

In a speech by Khamenei to air force commanders and staff, he responded to critics who question why Iranians chant “Death to America,” stating, “To enlighten the minds of American officials, I emphasize that we have nothing against the American people. ‘Death to America’ means death to U.S. rulers, namely, in this period, death to Trump, [former national security advisor John] Bolton and [then secretary of state Mike] Pompeo...As long as the U.S. regime behaves in a malevolent, evil-minded, and malicious way, the ‘Death to America’ slogan will [continue to come forth from] the powerful nation of Iran.”

Given that the purported bases of Iran’s enemy/friend politics are truth and morality, pure opposition to the enemy is regarded as a guiding principle. Khamenei has frequently stated that “our policies in the region are opposites to U.S. policies.” Since the “enemy” is existentially different and fundamentally evil, a true Muslim must avoid any friendly approach to it and avoid being susceptible to its influence in any way. Muslims should be constantly vigilant about the incurably evil essence of the enemy and remind

one another that the world is but a battlefield, and the decisive victory a guarantee of divine promise and providence.” Khamenei’s rhetoric serves to caricature the United States as a monster that should be humiliated and annihilated, not just defeated. With this as a baseline, it is impossible to establish a reliable basis for meaningful negotiations that normalize ties. Needless to say, President Trump’s bellicose rhetoric and actions reinforced the Supreme Leader in this view. From Khamenei’s perspective, conducting talks with the United States would mean letting Washington infiltrate Tehran’s politics and execute its plan to overthrow the regime. In response to the Trump administration’s gestures suggesting a willingness to negotiate, Khamenei said, “Everyone should know and be attentive—this is a trick!”

Khamenei’s animosity toward the Democrats is the same. On August 27, 2021, in his inaugural meeting with Ebrahim Raisi’s cabinet, he called President Biden a “hungry wolf” and said that the Democrats planned to infiltrate the Islamic Republic’s ranks and “corrupt the regime from within,” another reference to his favorite Iranian writer, Jalal al-e Ahmad, and his famous book, *Westoxication*.

In assessing official Iranian rhetoric about the United States, one must remember that for Khamenei, America is not so much a living, breathing nation-state as a symbol of the cosmic evil known as modernity. In this formulation, Iran too is a symbol—of the forces of good—instead of a worldly nation comprising diverse populations and varying viewpoints, even within its leadership. This dynamic reflects the Manichaeism that guides Khamenei’s politics, that of a continuing, messianic battle between good and evil. Such a drama will end with what Allah promised his true believers: the categorical victory of the righteous and the demise of their evil adversaries. Rooted in such an approach, Khamenei firmly believes that America, which his predecessor labeled the “Great Satan,” will vanish, to be replaced by a single world government ruled by representatives of the true Islam.

In 2019, marking the thirtieth anniversary of his predecessor’s death, Khamenei repeated what he describes as the “divine promise.” In characterizing America as being in a state of “termite-like demise,” he cited “official” statistics indicating “America’s economic decline and its loss of influence over the world economy.” For instance, as a “sign” of diminishing

U.S. authority and “America’s economic demise,” he mentioned its “\$800 billion budget deficit” and “\$15 trillion debt,” even if these metrics hardly indicate national decline in isolation. In denouncing America, Khamenei is prophesying the decline of everything associated with the United States and the West—namely, liberal democracy. The former U.S. president’s personal idiosyncrasies helped the Supreme Leader make this case: “Also in the political realm, America’s authority has declined; electing someone with Mr. Donald Trump’s characteristics is the obvious sign for the decline of American politics...bestowing the responsibility of the destiny of more than three hundred million [in] population on someone whose mental, psychological, and moral equilibrium is seriously doubtful...is vivid proof of America’s moral and political decline.” This caustic language, it bears noting, comes from a man who views himself as the visionary crafter of the ideal Islamic state-civilization.

On October 21, 2019, about two months before the Trump administration finally struck back against Iranian provocations across the region, Khamenei declared victory in the forty-year contest against the United States, arguing that, from “a broad perspective, America’s power, authority and grandeur are in decline; today’s America is far weaker than four decades ago...Not only are America’s spiritual authority and soft power declining, but the behavior of America’s current eccentric president has discredited ‘liberal democracy,’ which is the cornerstone of Western civilization.” Without naming him, Khamenei mentioned Francis Fukuyama as “a well-known world scholar” who revisited his theory of the end of history and expressed a belief in the “weakness and decline of America and liberal democracy.” “Don’t make an effort in groundless planning [against Iran],” Khamenei declared, “the demise of America is a reality...According to divine providence, America is doomed to vanish from the global power scene.”

On November 16, 2016, nearly a week after Trump’s election triumph, Khamenei tried to hide his surprise behind the usual anti-American rhetoric, not to differentiate between presidents or parties: “I have no judgment on the American election. That party and this party, whoever came [to power] was naughty toward us.” He sought advantage, however, in the presidential candidates’ critique of the current state of affairs in the United States, as

expressed during the televised debates: “The realities that have been discussed during America’s presidential race were previously said by others, but certain people were reluctant to believe them.” Apart from everything else, Khamenei appeared to project some *schadenfreude* over the victory of Trump, arguably the most outspoken critic of Washington politics among the candidates: “The one who was more candid attracted more attention from American people.”

While former president Barack Obama was perceived as having a distinctly conciliatory approach to Iran, Khamenei was never convinced, according to his speeches, that his administration was dramatically modifying the U.S. attitude toward Iran and had abandoned the idea of regime change. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump attacked his predecessor for signing a nuclear deal with Iran, calling it “a very bad deal” that benefited Iran more than the United States. With much sarcasm, Trump suggested that Iran should thank Obama for this great gift. Khamenei believed differently. On January 25, 2017, in reaction to Trump’s remark, Khamenei said: “Why should we thank America’s former administration? For anti-Iran sanctions? For creating [the Islamic State]? For setting the region on fire in Syria and Iraq? Or for its hypocrisy, namely, expressing affection and [willingness for] cooperation in the confidential letter while publicly supporting the Fitna [his term for the protests] after [Iran’s] 2009 election?...This is all proof of the very velvet glove by which America’s former administration was covering its iron fist.” Khamenei followed by again thanking Trump for his verbal assault on previous U.S. administrations: “Certainly, we are grateful to this newly arrived man, because he made our job easy by revealing America’s real face in his statements and attitudes during the electoral campaign and recent years.”

Setting aside Khamenei’s prejudices and perceptions about all U.S. presidents, Trump’s ascendance in particular appeared to have left an ambivalent impression on him. On one hand, while the Supreme Leader remained irrevocably suspicious about U.S. intentions and policies toward Iran, Trump’s presence appeared to signal safety from future threats. The nationalist and populist U.S. leader did not want foreign adventurism; he wanted out of the Middle East—and this seemed to provide a measure of

safety for the regime. A U.S. pullback would also dampen similar threats of retribution from actors such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. A full-fledged war from those parties would receive neither approval nor collaboration from the United States. Such an apparent reassurance enabled him to repeatedly and decisively, in his speeches, rule out the possibility of war.

On the other hand, Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, paired with his unpredictable offers to meet Iran at the negotiating table, appeared to have legitimately flummoxed the Supreme Leader. Unable to interpret Trump's zigzagging tweets and statements, he preferred to avoid any action before being convincingly reassured that Iran would not be deceived, or exposed as naive, by the United States. On May 22, 2019, Khamenei elaborated on the "enemy's varieties of gamesmanship," contending that the United States attempts to deceive Iran "sometimes by threats and sometimes by enticement." Khamenei has publicly cautioned Iranians to simply steer clear of the United States and its stratagems. "It is true that if Iran's current leaders and officials...take advantage of the potential in the best way, certainly greater progress will be made, but provided that Americans stay away." He emphasized that the "political trickery of the American president" would not make a fool of either the Islamic Republic's officials or its people. As he put it, "Iran must not let them get close."

Khamenei likewise addressed the newly elected speaker and members of the Assembly of Experts and responded to Trump's speech on November 17, 2017. Pointing to "Trump's nonsense," Khamenei described the U.S. president and ruling elite as suffering from "mental retardation" owing to "their inability to understand the developments in Iran and the region... This is why they are trapped in miscalculation and consecutive failures." He advised all to "avoid negligence in facing America's deceit and deception... The American president's pose of stupidity should not lead to negligence about the enemy's [level of] deceit and conspiracy...Of course, war will not happen, but there are issues no less important than war." Among the issues "no less important than war," in this formulation, are sanctions.

Distorting the Image of the United States

In the Islamic Republic, little has changed over more than four decades regarding the effort to caricature the United States, to transform it into a demon, rather than presenting the pluralistic, democratic, complex society it is. Donald Trump no doubt provided fodder for this effort. His loud threats and manipulations of fact, among other behaviors, made it easier for Iranian leaders to cast the United States as an unstable state rather than a steady superpower. But whoever the U.S. leader may be, official Iranian attempts to brainwash the public will persist.

Yet analysis of Khamenei's speeches demonstrates weaknesses in his ideological apparatus. President Biden's policy of pressuring the Raisi administration has convinced strategists in Tehran that the United States has accepted the nuclear Iran and that—goaded as well by its regional allies—Washington will maintain economic and political pressure. While the Biden administration has floated the idea of a Plan B for the Islamic regime in case the nuclear talks collapse, for Khamenei Plan B is the same as Plan A. He is using a familiar form of rhetorical chicanery: portraying the Iranian citizenry as a monolith and simultaneously asserting that his own will and beliefs genuinely reflect the entire nation's heart and mind. Those who do not believe in the political system or who disagree with him, according to this model, belong among the wretched. These "subjects" do not fit the profile of "true Iranians" and should be excommunicated.

The attempt to distance Iran from "disbelievers" appears not only in Khamenei's rhetoric; it is also widely institutionalized. The entire government employment system is based on ideological screening that takes place at Gozinesh ("Selection") offices nationwide. According to the Gozinesh Law, passed in 1985, all applicants for government jobs should prove not only their belief in *velayat-e faqih* but also their practical commitment to this concept. Following Khamenei's discourse pattern, the state's official rhetoric uses "Iran," "Iranian people," or "our nation" interchangeably to refer to the Supreme Leader or the regime. By employing this rhetorical trick, the government portrays its own critics and adversaries as national enemies and threats and generates the false impression that opponents of

its own roguish policies and attitudes are sworn enemies of each Iranian citizen. The more that Islamic ideology loses its appeal—a trend strongly under way—the more desperate the government becomes to take refuge in patriotic sentiments and people’s emotional ties to their homeland or their fellows. In recent remarks, for example, Khamenei beseeched citizens to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election: “A person may dislike me—no problem—but does he love his country? [If so] he should participate in the election.”

When faced with the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known, Iran’s reluctant initial decision was to stay within the deal rather than “burn” it. Reassured that Washington wanted to avoid military confrontation, Khamenei began engaging in harsher rhetoric against the United States. A chief goal was to humiliate the president, and the political dynamics reassured him that such rhetoric would not have practical costs. On May 9, 2018, the day after the United States announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Khamenei responded to Trump’s accusation that Iran supported terrorism with these words: “Last night, you heard the American president’s words, ridiculous and thoughtless talk; probably more than ten lies were included in his speech...He threatened both the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic...so on behalf of the Iranian people, I would say, Mr. Trump, you have no right!”

Previously, on September 11, 2017, referring to Trump’s speech at the UN General Assembly, Khamenei described his remarks as “worthless, inconsistent, despicable, stupid and entirely untrue,” delivered “not out of power but out of resentment, frustration, and silliness, because they are extremely angry and unhappy that, thanks to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s effective presence, their many years’ plans for the Western Asia region failed.” Khamenei, who dates bilateral hostility not to the 1979 revolution but to 1953, when the United States coordinated the overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected prime minister Muhammad Mossadeq, has sought to emphasize American decline over those many decades. In his November 3, 2019, speech, he divined that “the wolfish America has certainly become weaker but more beastly and impudent.” He concluded that negotiation with the United States “is truly fruitless...Certain [politicians] who regard

negotiations with America as a problem solver are definitely wrong; there will be no result from dialogue with Americans, because they will not give us any positive points.”

Part of the American frustration in Iraq stems from underestimating the Shia religious authority and network in the country. A lack of clarity about the nature of the Iraqi Shia religious authority, its social influence, its political capability, and its relationship to the Iranian clerical establishment and government has caused various problems for U.S. policy in Iraq. Sometimes, the United States has relied too much on Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, expecting him to calm multiple tensions generated by different Shia groups. Sometimes, Americans have ignored the power and potential of the Iraqi Shia religious network and its connection to the Shia and Sunni networks outside Iraq. A politicization and radicalization of the Shia authority and network have occurred not only inside Iraq but also throughout the Shia world.

The Iranian Supreme Leadership has largely transformed the unorganized traditional Shia clerical establishment into a systematic political and financial network that works against U.S. interests in the region. A vast front of moderate Shia does exist all around the world. These moderates dwell among both clerics and intellectuals, with divergent traditional or democratic tendencies. But what has become known as “the Shia clerical establishment” is mainly under the Iranian regime’s control. That apparatus has largely become a tool in the hands of Shia extremism, leaving other religious or secular currents on the margins, without institutional means, social influence, and communications capabilities. The clerical establishment has been transformed from a civil institution into the strong arm of a totalitarian government. As long as that clerical establishment enjoys ample financial resources from the Iranian government and can conduct political activity under the cover of religious activity, the Middle East will face serious peril from Shia extremist fundamentalism.

The metamorphosis of the seminary from a religious educational institute that manages the religious affairs of worshippers into an integral part of an ideological arsenal of the fundamentalist Iranian government dates from the beginning of the Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor both succeeded in undermining the civil and religious roles of the clerical

establishment and politicizing it as much as they could. Politicizing the clerical network went far beyond Iran's borders. Khamenei, in particular, has tried to expand his domination of the Shia networks in the region. Through sophisticated mechanisms, he has altered the symbolic and material capacity of the Shia religious institutions throughout the region in his own political favor, using them to support his anti-Western and anti-American policy. Sistani may well be the last traditional Shia authority (marja) not only in Iraq but in the entire Shia world. If the marjas no longer function as in the past, the environment within which U.S. policy functions will change.

A post-*marjaiya* era will be characterized by politicization of the Shia religious network and reinforcement of the Iranian regime's power and influence outside Iran; by contrast, the influence of the Iranian regime inside the country will diminish. The effects will be felt not only by the West but even more dramatically by democratic forces inside Shia countries or communities. By ending the *marjaiya* era and destroying the traditional function of the clerical establishment, the Iranian regime intends to eliminate any possibility of political change from within, to marginalize civil society and democratic movements, and consequently to limit the West's options in dealing with the Iranian government.

Despite the leverage exercised by Khamenei over national decisions, Iran's presidents, whether Raisi, Rouhani, or Ahmadinejad, have their own reasons for outrage toward the United States, often focused on negotiations. On December 16, 2019, for example, two weeks before the bilateral escalation, Rouhani said that "if there was a different president in America, we would have negotiated." This reinforces a comment he made two months earlier, on October 14, 2019, when he said that "Trump's personality has made things difficult for everyone." The broader perception of the former president, however, appears to have been more complex. On April 11, 2019, Hossein Shariatmadari, Khamenei's confidant and representative at the Kayhan Institute, a media organization under the leader's direct supervision, said, "Trump is stupid, but unlike some prevailing wisdom, he is not insane."

On January 29, 2017, Shariatmadari opined, "Unlike [former Soviet president Mikhail] Gorbachev, who was a social democratic advocate of the communist system, Trump is a billionaire capitalist—but what is common

between the two is deconstruction which aims to reform the system.” On October 15, 2017, Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, offered: “America’s hostility [toward Iran] is an unchangeable strategy, and only its tactics vary...today, America presents as crazy [to us] in order to gain advantage through a crazy method.” He criticized those frightened by Trump’s aggressive attitude and convinced of the necessity of avoiding provocation because of the U.S. leader’s posturing as a warmonger. “Today, Trump pretends that he is crazy for the sake of gaining points,” he said. “People should not worry about war...our country is so powerful that no one can attack and confront the Islamic Republic.”

On April 25, 2018, Rouhani called Trump “a businessman, constructor, and tower builder” who “knows nothing about politics and the law.” Trump was widely perceived by Iranian decisionmakers and elites, not unlike domestic U.S. critics, as someone who had turned his back on his country’s political traditions and followed his personal and professional instincts. For instance, in commenting on the IRGC’s targeting of U.S. drones, on April 24, 2019, Majlis member Abolfazl Mousavi Biuki said, “Trump is a businessman, and no businessman wages war.” Hojatoleslam Abdollah Haji Sadeqi, another Majlis member, likewise emphasized in 2019 that the U.S. president’s views on Iran have propaganda, commercial, and electoral dimensions. “Trump is a businessman and looks at everything from a business perspective,” he said.

Khamenei, for his part, has expressed skepticism and cynicism toward the Biden administration. Shortly after Biden was declared the forty-sixth president of the United States, Khamenei told a group of students: “You can’t count on their words and empty promises.” According to reports from domestic media after the first round of meetings with the U.S. team in Vienna, in early spring 2021, the Supreme Leader was briefed that Biden expected talks to include Iran’s ballistic missile program as well as its military support for Shia proxy groups in the region. Khamenei then responded, “They say we can’t have missiles. It is none of their business. They interfere in the region with all sorts of violent consequences, but then they are demanding that we don’t get involved.”

Strategic Pursuit of the Bomb

Iranian leaders have made many contradictory decisions in the past four-plus decades and have justified them with religious creeds. The Iranian nuclear program is not an exception to this rule. Khamenei's attitude toward Iran's nuclear program is almost certainly driven by his political agenda, not his religious views.

Much attention has been given to his claim that the program does not aim to produce a nuclear bomb because Islam forbids the production of weapons that could kill innocent civilians. But there is also serious reason to doubt that claim. According to Quran verse 8:60, one should "Make ready for them whatever force and strings of horses you can, to terrify the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them that you know not; God knows them." Muslims must accordingly be armed with advanced weapons to fight the enemies of an Islamic country, as well as to guarantee internal security. Contemporary jurists take "strings of horses" as a symbol to include "all modern military tools and weapons." Some Shia jurists believe that anything that frightens the enemy is good. It is very difficult to find a law in Islam that forbids Muslims from using any kind of weapon against the "enemies of God." One can claim that in Islam, killing civilians, innocent women, and children is forbidden. But this does not forbid the production of weapons of mass destruction if the ruling jurist sees that their possession would frighten the country's enemies.

The late Hossein Ali Montazeri, the Shia jurist once in line to be Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, wrote, "Military preparation is not just for waging war. The Muslims' military duty is not limited to when an enemy exists and he is actually attacking Islamic countries; but the goal of preparation is to frighten and seriously intimidate potential enemies...this is what is called

‘armed peace.’” In Islamic jurisprudence, the distinction between civilians and combatants is very obscure when it comes to infidels. Allameh Heli, a fifteenth-century Shia jurist, described this as a matter of finding consensus among Shia jurists, and stated that if beating the enemy requires attacking and killing women, children, and elders, then such killing must occur.

In “Islamic Juridical Foundations of *Istishhadi* [Suicide] Operations,” an article published in the Assembly of Experts quarterly, *Hokoumat-e Eslami*, editor Sayyed Javad Varai argues that according to Shia judicial principles, suicide operations are not prohibited and are in fact virtuous. In response to a question about killing innocent people in the course of a suicide bombing, he argues:

First, sometimes all members of the enemy, including women and men, young and old, are involved in the invasion...hence the only way to deprive them of security is *istishhadi* operations. Second, it is possible that the enemy’s women have been trained to fight along with their men, hence they are the enemy’s soldiers and killing them is considered as killing enemy forces, not innocent citizens...Third, when Islam’s fighters conduct such operations, the killing of others [innocent citizens] seems to be inevitable.

For many clerics in Qom and Najaf, “infidel” blood does not merit the same respect as Muslim blood. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who heads the powerful Guardian Council and is a close advisor to Khamenei, stated on November 20, 2005, “Human beings, apart from Muslims, are animals who roam the Earth and engage in corruption.” Such language would not seem to pose much of a barrier to the mass casualties that a nuclear weapon would inflict.

Another way to approach Shia theological views on nuclear war is to look at jihad, a controversial issue in Shia jurisprudence. The original idea was that the Infallible Imam holds the exclusive right to order offensive jihad and that, in his absence, Shia can be involved only in defensive jihad. Since the time of the Safavids and after the emergence of the theory that gives part of the imam’s authority to a Shia jurist, some jurists started to discuss the legitimacy of offensive jihad. Ayatollah Khomeini’s early view was that the

order for offensive jihad was the exclusive right of the Infallible Imam. But he changed his view later and came to the belief that “the Shia jurist has all the authority of the imam except if there is religious proof that a specific right or authority of an imam has to do with his personal identity and not his position as the head of the government.” In a reply to a follower, Ali Khamenei stated that offensive jihad can be ordered by a qualified jurist if it is in the interest of the Islamic Republic.

In the unpublished transcript of Khamenei’s courses, he advocated the theory that legitimizes the ruling jurist’s order for offensive jihad. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the Supreme Leader’s mentor in religious law, also subscribed to this theory. In his view, all purportedly offensive jihads are in fact defensive. In his book *Resaleh-ye Tozih al-Masael* (Islamic Law Codes), he wrote, “The offensive jihad is a war that an imam wages in order to invite infidels and non-monotheists to Islam or to prevent the violation of the Treaty of Ahl-e Zemmah. In fact, the goal of offensive jihad is not the conquest of other countries, but the defense of the inherent rights of nations that are deprived of power by the infidels, non-monotheists, and rebels from the worship of God, monotheism, and justice.” He stated that offensive jihad becomes an obligation for all Muslims when an Infallible Imam or a ruling jurist orders it. After quoting the Quranic verse, “Fight them [the unbelievers], till there is no persecution and [all] religion is [that of] God’s entirely,” Montazeri commented, “This verse includes defensive as well as offensive jihad. Jihad, like prayer, is for all times.”

Islamic Thoughts and Nuclear Weapons

Understanding the role of religion in politics in the Islamic Republic is fundamental to any attempt to assess the implications of Iran’s nuclear program. Most assessments, however, overlook this factor. Any effort to craft an effective policy toward Iran’s nuclear program must examine the religious values, beliefs, and doctrines that inform politics in the Islamic Republic and are likely to influence Iran’s nuclear decisionmaking.

Despite significant circumstantial evidence that Iran is pursuing the

means to produce nuclear weapons, skeptics point to Tehran's claims that the Islamic Republic does not seek the bomb because Islam bans weapons of mass destruction. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq made frequent battlefield use of chemical weapons. Iran did not respond in kind because it lacked the ability to do so at the time, and because Khomeini apparently considered chemical weapons to be prohibited by Islam. The Supreme Leader reportedly reversed his stance toward the end of the war amid fears that Iraq was preparing to use chemical weapons against Iranian cities. Iran is believed to have eventually developed a limited chemical-warfare capability for deterrence purposes, although there is no evidence that it actually used chemical agents or munitions during the war.

In autumn of 2003, Khamenei issued an oral fatwa forbidding the production and use of weapons of mass destruction in any form. Since then, Khamenei and other officials have repeatedly asserted that Iran is not seeking to acquire the bomb because Islam bans such weapons, although Khamenei's more recent statements have been ambiguous with regard to the development and stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Khamenei's nuclear fatwa is consistent with a corpus of rulings in Islamic tradition that prohibit weapons that are indiscriminate in their effects and therefore likely to kill women, children, and the elderly.

Nevertheless, a significant countervailing tradition permits the use of any means to cow and intimidate nonbelievers or to prevail over them in warfare. Moreover, fatwas are issued in response to specific circumstances and can be altered in response to changing conditions. Khomeini modified his position on a number of issues during his lifetime, including positions on taxes, military conscription, women's suffrage, and monarchy as a form of government. Thus, nothing would prevent Khamenei from modifying or supplanting his nuclear fatwa should circumstances dictate a change in policy. Shia tradition permits deception and dissimulation in matters of life and death, and when such tactics serve the interests of the Islamic umma (community). Such considerations have almost certainly shaped Iran's nuclear diplomacy, though it should be kept in mind that nearly every proliferator has also engaged in deception to conceal its nuclear activities.

Before he died, Ayatollah Khomeini affirmed the Islamic Republic's

authority to destroy a mosque or suspend the observance of the Five Pillars of Islam (declaration of faith, prayer, alms giving, fasting, and pilgrimage) if such measures were rendered necessary by the “expediency” or “interests” of the regime. Thus, Khomeini formalized the supremacy of *raison d'état* over the tenets of Islam as the core principle guiding domestic and foreign policy decisionmaking in Iran. The regime’s principle of expediency elevates the survival of the Islamic Republic to a supreme religious value, since only by this means can revolutionary Islam triumph. It then becomes a justification for the often extreme means used by the regime to stay in power.

The Expediency Council was created in 1988 to mediate between the Majlis and Guardian Council regarding legislation and constitutional issues, and to advise the Supreme Leader on matters pertaining to discernment of regime expediency. The council’s authorities are outlined in Iran’s 1989 constitution, which stipulates that if parliament passes a law that the Guardian Council deems un-Islamic or unconstitutional, the Expediency Council will advise the Supreme Leader as to whether the law is in the interest of the regime. Legislation, therefore, is not necessarily grounded in Islamic law, but rather in regime expediency as defined by the Supreme Leader, who may intervene in the functioning of the system as he sees fit in order to secure this objective.

Thus, the Supreme Leader also has the final say on nuclear decisionmaking. He is not constrained by his previous fatwas, which he can alter or reverse, or the opinions of other *mujtahids* (Islamic jurists). And if he believes that expediency calls for the acquisition, deployment, or use of nuclear weapons, religious principles would not prevent the Islamic Republic from doing so. Iranian decisionmaking, therefore, bears to an extraordinary extent the imprint of one man’s personality and politics, unaffected by the will of other men, the decisions of other institutions, or even the moral scruples of religion.

Because Shia religious doctrine exalts the suffering and martyrdom of the faithful, Iran is sometimes portrayed as an irrational state with a high pain threshold, driven by the absolute imperatives of religion rather than by the pragmatic concerns of statecraft. This perception, however, is anachronistic at best. In the context of Tehran’s relatively activist, anti-status quo foreign

policy, Iranian decisionmakers have generally sought to minimize risk by shunning direct confrontation and acting through proxies, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, or indirect means in order to preserve deniability. Such behavior reflects an ability to engage in rational calculation and accurately assess power relationships. Tehran's cautious behavior during past crises is the best proof that post-Khomeini Iran has generally sought to avoid direct involvement in potentially costly conflicts. Thus, in the 1991 Shia uprising in Iraq, the 1998 Taliban capture of Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan (which resulted in the slaughter of thousands of Shia Afghan Hazaras and the murder of eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist), the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, and the 2011 crackdown on Shia protesters in Bahrain, Iran left beleaguered Shia communities to their fates rather than enter into potentially costly foreign adventures. Since the late 1980s, the principle of expediency has generally been interpreted to ensure that the Islamic Republic's anti-status quo agenda was implemented with relative circumspection.

The New Hardliners and the Resistance Doctrine

In the past two decades or so, the Supreme Leader has encouraged the emergence of a new generation of largely nonclerical, ideologically hardline politicians and military officials who yearn for a return to the values of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and who embrace the regime's doctrine of resistance. Some subscribe to a version of Shia Islam that assigns central importance to hastening the reappearance of the hidden Twelfth Imam.

Iran's newer hardliners tend to be more insular in outlook than their predecessors. At least some of the revolution's founding generation lived and studied abroad before the revolution. Moreover, their defiant, confrontational style has already aggravated tensions with the United States and the international community. Yet much remains to be learned about this group's worldview. Many of these hardliners have roots in, or ties to, the IRGC, which controls Iran's ballistic missiles and oversees its weapons programs. Regardless of any Iranian president's political fortunes, these hardliners will likely play a key role in Iranian nuclear decisionmaking.

Loyal to the Supreme Leader, the newer generation of hardliners is not accountable to any of Iran's elected institutions. Moreover, it has a narrow but committed base of support in Iranian society and takes an unwavering approach to the regime's opponents at home and abroad. For this reason, Iran's current leadership may feel less constrained by domestic and international opinion in charting a foreign policy course. Moreover, under certain circumstances, some of these leaders might welcome a limited conflict with the United States to bolster flagging domestic support for the regime and revive the values of the revolution. Such attitudes might increase the regime's tolerance for foreign risk-taking and complicate efforts to establish a stable deterrent relationship with a nuclear Iran.

Finally, these hardliners are committed to implementing the Islamic Republic's activist credo of fighting injustice and oppression abroad. They believe that Iran is a rising power, that the United States is a power in decline, and that Israel's days are numbered. The Shia vision of the triumph of the downtrodden and long-suffering community of believers seems to be unfolding before their very eyes. Believing that God and history are on their side, might Iran's current leaders be tempted to hasten the process of American "decline" by providing nuclear technology or weapons to states, or non-state actors that likewise seek to undermine and constrain U.S. power? The ambitions of Iran's leaders and the history of nuclear proliferation provide reason for concern; nearly every nuclear proliferator has shared its nuclear know-how and helped other states obtain the bomb.

Apocalyptic Thinking and Nuclear Weapons

Twelver Shia Islam has given rise to three broad approaches to the role of human agency in the reappearance of the Mahdi: The traditional, conservative quietist approach calls for the faithful to patiently await the reappearance of the Mahdi while engaging in prayer and acts of piety. The revolutionary activist approach calls on believers to create an Islamic government in order to combat religious corruption and injustice, and to fight on behalf of the downtrodden in Iran, the Palestinian territories, and elsewhere. The violent

apocalyptic approach, which is followed by small, marginal splinter groups in Iran and elsewhere, embraces the use of nihilistic violence.

Shia Jurisprudence, Political Expediency, and Nuclear Weapons

“Islamic law exists to serve the interests of the Muslim community and of Islam. [Therefore,] to save Muslim lives and for the sake of Islam’s survival it is obligatory to lie, it is obligatory to drink wine [if necessary].”

—Ayatollah Khomeini

For a number of years now, officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran have stated that Islam forbids the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons, and that Supreme Leader Khamenei has issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, to this effect. Such statements have led some commentators in the West to claim that this fatwa, which reflects the fundamental tenets of Islam, might well prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb. Given the importance of this issue to the security and stability of the Middle East and to U.S. interests in the region, one must subject this claim to critical scrutiny, with the goal of understanding to what extent Iran’s decisionmakers are restrained by Islamic principles and laws.

Indeed, Iran’s conduct during the Iran-Iraq War provides reason to believe that Iranian nuclear decisionmaking is likely to be guided not just by religious principles, but by a more complex mix of considerations. During that war, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein repeatedly used his nation’s air force and surface-to-surface missiles to attack Iranian cities. Although Iranian officials announced their opposition to targeting civilians, claiming the practice to be prohibited on religious grounds, the Islamic Republic did indeed retaliate in kind, killing many Iraqi civilians in numerous rocket and missile attacks. Moreover, in response to Iraqi chemical weapons attacks,

Ayatollah Khomeini is reported to have eventually permitted the production and stockpiling of chemical weapons, though there is no evidence that Iran actually used them during the war.

These strikes reached such a level that Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Majlis and commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces, recalled in his diary that Iraqi Sunni religious authorities met in Najaf (possibly at Baghdad's urging) with Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Khoei, then the most revered Shia religious authority, asking him to urge Khomeini to cease the attacks on Iraqi cities. Khoei declined, apparently because "he knew that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would not listen to him," a strong indication that Khoei, who held to the Islamic proscription on killing noncombatants, did not believe Khomeini's decisionmaking was guided by Shia religious law. While contradictions between what politicians say and do are not unusual, the Iranian case is particularly important given the international community's concerns about the regime's nuclear intentions and the stakes involved in Iran's potential proliferation.

As Iran's military and financial resources to prosecute the war with Iraq dwindled in 1988, Mohsen Rezaei, then IRGC commander-in-chief, wrote a letter to Khomeini stating that Iran would need nuclear weapons if it were to continue fighting the war. Khomeini's response was disclosed in the memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri and more recently in a volume of Rafsanjani's diaries. In these sources, Rezaei was quoted as saying,

There are no victories forthcoming in the next five years...If in the next five years we can raise 350 infantry brigades, acquire 2,500 tanks, 3,000 artillery pieces, and 300 warplanes, and can produce nuclear and laser weapons—which are among the necessities of modern war—then, God willing, we can think of resuming offensive operations.

As for Khomeini's response itself, first of all, he accepted both a ceasefire with Iraq and UN Security Council Resolution 598. But apparently this acquiescence did not arise from opposition to using an atomic bomb, but rather from concerns regarding Iran's ability to produce or buy such a weapon. Khomeini apparently never issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons or other

weapons of mass destruction. Since the mid-1990s, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been denying accusations that Iran is trying to produce weapons of mass destruction. But over time, his emphasis has shifted from a denial of the practical utility of nuclear weapons to a focus on Islamic prohibitions against their use. Khamenei once stated, "We do not want an atomic bomb. We are even against having chemical weapons. Even when Iraq attacked us with chemical weapons, we did not produce chemical weapons. This is against our principles." He later clarified this point:

There is a difference between nuclear technology and a nuclear weapon...We do not have the motivation to pursue nuclear weapons. We have not and will not go after them. We do not need a nuclear bomb. If we defeat our enemy so far, it was not with nuclear bombs.

Khamenei's statements on the religious prohibition against the production and use of weapons of mass destruction "in any form" were apparently first recorded in October 2003. More explicit language on the matter came on March 21, 2005, when the Supreme Leader said, "[Western governments] lie and say that we are concerned about making a bomb. They know that the production of an atomic bomb is not on our agenda. The Iranian people should know it...Using atomic weapons to destroy other nations is an American behavior...Islam does not allow us [to produce the atomic bomb]." Then, during separate speeches on June 4 and November 9, 2006, he once again spoke bluntly about the issue:

[The West claims] that Iran is after a nuclear bomb. This is untrue and is a pure lie. We do not need nuclear bombs. We do not have any target against which we can use nuclear bombs. We believe that using nuclear weapons is against Islamic rulings (*ahkam*). We have explicitly announced this. We believe that imposing on our people the cost of producing and stockpiling nuclear weapons is absurd. Production of such weapons and their preservation is very costly and we do not

see it [as] right to impose these costs onto our people. This is not right to use science in order to produce...nuclear weapons. [Because] when such a bomb is dropped somewhere, it would kill both guilty and innocent, armed individuals, young children, babies, and oppressed human beings. A science used for this end and a country in possession of such a weapon and its development would lead to this point which we do not approve [of]; we do not like such change.

It is worth noting that although Khamenei states explicitly that the use of nuclear weapons is forbidden in Islam, he has also spoken more ambiguously regarding their production or stockpiling. For instance, in a June 4, 2009, speech he said:

The Iranian nation and its officials have repeatedly announced that we do not want nuclear weapons...We announced that using the bomb is forbidden in Islam. Preserving [nuclear weapons] is a grave danger and [a] trouble.

And on February 19, 2010:

We do not believe in atomic weapons...We would not go after [them]. According to our religious convictions, our religious principles, using such weapons of mass destruction is forbidden, is haram [religiously forbidden]. This is [the] destruction of land and people, which the Quran forbids.

Two months later, at the Tehran International Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, Khamenei concluded his speech by saying, "We believe that using such weapons is haram." He does not mention producing or stockpiling them. Perhaps, in the Supreme Leader's view, creating and storing such weapons will be sufficient to change the power equation in the region, thus obviating the need for religiously objectionable use of the weapons. Interestingly, no written texts exist for the Supreme Leader's fatwas, though Shia judicial tradition grants equal weight to oral and written legal opinions.

Are WMD Forbidden by Islam?

To understand how Iranian leaders view nuclear weapons, one must consider not only the status of these weapons in traditional Islamic jurisprudence, but also the ways in which dissimulation, fatwas, and the doctrine of state interest (*maslaha*) play into decisionmaking in the Islamic Republic. Most Shia jurists believe that Islam forbids the use of weapons of mass destruction, but the debate is not yet resolved. For opponents, the main legal argument is that they would kill civilians. But other jurists contend that any means can justify winning a war. The prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Shia jurist Sayyed Ali Tabatabai, who founded Karbala's local police to protect the Shia holy city against Sunnis, writes in his seminal work: "It is permitted to fight by all means that guarantee victory, such as besieging fortresses, using siege catapults, setting fires [to people's houses and properties], felling trees, flooding residences, or depriving [enemy civilians] of water and so on." To buttress his argument, Tabatabai mentions actions committed by the Prophet Muhammad in his war against the people of Taef and the Bani Nazir tribe. Victory in war, Tabatabai continues, can justify even the killing of Muslim women, children, the elderly, prisoners, and businesspeople, as well as non-Muslims.

In Islamic jurisprudence, the distinction between civilians and combatants is unclear when it comes to nonbelievers and mature male Muslims. Fine distinctions do exist in Islamic law between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between non-Muslims who live in Islamic lands (*Dar al-Islam*) and pay taxes to the Islamic government and non-Muslims who live in the lands governed by nonbelievers (*Dar al-Kufr*), also known in Islamic jurisprudence as the domain of war (*Dar al-Harb*). Given these parameters, it is difficult to define the notion of God's enemy as excluding noncombatant nonbelievers when Islam allows Muslims to use any kind of weapon against the "enemies of God."

Thus, according to a verse in the Quran—and one that constitutes part of the IRGC uniform logo—the forces of Islam would seem to have very wide latitude in dealing with nonbelievers: "And prepare against them whatever

you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged.”

Iranian nuclear decisionmaking may also be influenced by Shia Islam’s attitude toward dissimulation and moral relativism. Even though Islam is a religion of law, its tenets are not necessarily respected unconditionally or categorically. As in other law-based religions, such as Judaism, a practical, commonsense approach guides the Muslim attitude toward law. While Shia believe that justice is an absolute good and injustice is an absolute evil, they have a very nuanced and ambiguous approach to defining good and bad, just and unjust. But in this ambiguity dwells a risk of lapsing into moral relativism.

For instance, Muslim jurists do not believe that “honesty” is an absolute moral value. Therefore, juridical texts cover the various permissible and impermissible types of lying. A phrase by the classical Persian poet Saadi captures the prevailing view among Muslims: “A convenient lie is better than an evil-causing truth.” By this, he means that if telling the truth puts one’s life at risk, then truth loses its virtue. The classical Muslim thinker al-Ghazali, who lived in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, believed that lying was in itself not bad and only haram if it hurt someone. He explained speech as a means to an end. If a good end can be reached both by telling the truth and by telling a lie, then lying is impermissible. But if the end is a duty [*vajib*] and can be reached both by telling a lie and the truth, then lying is permissible. And if a duty cannot be fulfilled except by telling a lie, then lying is a duty.

In contemporary Iran, the pro-regime theologian Morteza Motahhari distinguishes between expedient or “altruistic” lies (*dorough-e maslahat amiz*), which aim to promote a greater good, and self-interested lies (*dorough-e manefat khiz*), which are motivated by personal gain or advantage. Expedient lies, he explains, are not bad—in fact, their moral value is truthlike. Another judicial concept on which Motahhari elaborates is *towria*, or the use of double-meaning that serves a purpose and avoids outright deception. As Motahhari tells it:

Enemy spies are pursuing an innocent person and are searching homes. They ask you about him. You are an honest person but if you tell the truth, that innocent person's life will be at risk. When they ask you, "Have you seen him?" say "no," but by "no" you do not mean that you have not seen him (you mean, for instance, that you did not see him last week, not today). This is *towria*.

Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, another pro-regime theologian, believes lying can be permitted not only to save one's life, but also to save one's money: "Lying that leads to protection of one's money [assets] or another's money is good and necessary." When asked about how to respond to the imposition of an illegitimate tax, one of the Shia imams recommended that the individual "lie and save that money." The imam even advised Shia to "take a false oath and not let unjust rulers take people's money." All in all, most Shia jurists believe lying is permissible or necessary in times of war; to reconcile individuals to each other; to preserve domestic peace between husband and wife or two Muslim individuals; by adults to children, in certain cases; and to terminally ill individuals about their condition. In general, jurists recognize the legitimacy of lying during wartime as a means of deceiving the enemy. In Shia Islam, the interests of the Muslim community stand above the interests of each Muslim individual. Hence, if Islamic law permits Muslims to lie for the sake of their own personal interests or welfare, then certainly Islamic governments can lie on behalf of the interests of the Muslim umma.

Interrelation of *Taqiyya* and *Velayat*

The uniquely Shia principle of *taqiyya* is also likely to have an important influence on Iranian nuclear decisionmaking, and it has applied across the four-plus decades of the Islamic Republic. *Taqiyya* translates literally as caution, fear, or avoidance. But the term also denotes a uniquely Shia principle—that of engaging in deception for the sake of self-protection—and is synonymous with one interpretation of *ketman* (concealment).

In practice, taqiyya dictates that if ever one's life or money is at risk, lying about one's faith or any other matter is permissible to avert harm. The classical Shia theologian Amin al-Islam Tabarsi said that taqiyya is permitted "in all cases if it is necessary." Some jurists argue further that in safeguarding the interests of the Muslim community, taqiyya can be highly desirable. Ayatollah Khomeini himself stated publicly that rulers or subjects should lie or even drink wine (meaning violate sharia) when required for the expediency of the Islamic government. The principle of taqiyya is rooted in centuries of Shia status as a persecuted minority under Sunni rule, during which Shia had to dissemble in order to survive.

A *vali*, whose status is similar to that of a saint in the Christian tradition, is known esoterically as a "friend of God," one who has access to God and his truth. In Shia tradition, the vali may be understood in terms of the medieval concept of the philosopher, the bearer of truth. *Velaya*, roughly "authority," has legal and political as well as religious implications. Whereas certain Shia imams and prophets can achieve *veli* status, political rulers too can attain velaya through their authority to rule. Since Ayatollah Khomeini was a Sufi and a jurist alike, embodying both the esoteric and legal conceptions of *velaya*. According to his notion of *velayat-e faqih*, the *faqih* (ruler) has authority equivalent to that of Muhammad and the twelve Infallible Imams of Shia Islam.

The dichotomy of *kashf* (discovery) versus *entekhab* (appointment) also helps elucidate the place of velaya on the Iranian political scene. On the one hand, certain regime hardliners such as former judiciary head Muhammad Yazdi and the cleric Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi believe in *kashf*, or the divine appointment of a leader. In this interpretation, the Assembly of Experts serves only as a medium to reveal divine will, as in the selection of imams and prophets. Reformist clerics, on the other hand, subscribe to the notion that leaders are actually appointed by the Assembly of Experts, without divine guidance. For those who subscribe to *kashf*, the implications involve not only the spiritual status of the ruling jurist but also his ability to rely on his own judgment and knowledge to discern God's will when making decisions, without the need for outside counsel.

Role of Religious Rulings

In Islamic law, as discussed in earlier chapters, *ijtehad* refers to a personal judicial philosophy. In the classic books of *usul al-fiqh* (legal theory), a *mujtahid* (practitioner of *ijtehad*) is defined as someone who possesses an intellectual faculty that enables him to deduce God's orders from the primary sources of Islam (namely, the Quran and hadith), rational reasoning, and the conditional consensus of early Islamic interpreters of the law. A *mujtahid*—who may hold the title *faqih* or *mufti*—has the authority to issue a *fatwa*, or religious ruling. Not just any aspirant can attain the status of a *mujtahid*. Two means exist for reaching *ijtehad*: receipt of a certificate from one's teacher—a well-established *mujtahid* himself—or publication of one's writings, which will indicate clearly the sufficiency of one's intellectual faculties. Once a student has attained *ijtehad*, he is forbidden from following another *mujtahid* and must perform his religious duties according to his own legal understanding.

For those who are not scholars or who have not attained the status of *mujtahid*, the requirement, according to most jurists, is that they follow the most learned (*alam*) *mujtahid*. Therefore, choosing a *mujtahid* as a source of emulation is not an arbitrary decision; one must be certain about the religious credentials of the *mujtahid* he follows. In addition to his intellectual ability, a *mujtahid* must be a living, adult, Twelver Shia male of legitimate descent who is just and sane. A *mujtahid* can issue not only a *fatwa*—a definitive opinion based on his deductions from the religious texts or empirical evidence—but also a more tentative ruling known as an *ehtiat* (literally, a caution). Though indefinite, an *ehtiat* is thought to estimate divine will.

A follower is obliged to honor his *mujtahid*'s *fatwas* but not his *ehtiats* (cautious opinion) and can, in the latter case, turn to a *mujtahid* less learned than his own to seek an alternative opinion. In Shiism, a *mujtahid* is regarded as fallible and, as a result, his rulings are not necessarily considered manifestations of the divine. Yet, whereas a *mujtahid*'s opinion is considered his opinion, God's will is beyond the reach of worshippers in the absence of the so-called Infallible Imam, and so they have no choice but to follow a *mujtahid*'s opinion. Even if a *mujtahid* fails to correctly understand the earthly expression of God's divine order, he is held blameless. In contrast

to Shia doctrine, most Sunnis believe a mufti—the Sunni equivalent of mujtahid—is infallible (*saeb*) and that God’s orders and expressions of will multiply in accordance with the number of his opinions. In other words, God has as many expressions of will as there are muftis, with each opinion of each mufti is a reflection.

Any discussion of ijihad must note the fluidity of clerical rulings. A mujtahid can return to the text, discover new evidence, make new arguments, or be convinced by another’s reasoning and ultimately change his views on a given matter. Therefore, a mujtahid’s fatwa may differ not only from that of another mujtahid but also from his own previous rulings. A worshipper can learn about a mujtahid’s fatwa from any of four sources:

- The mujtahid himself
- Two just worshippers (i.e., who have not been seen committing major sins)
- A person known to be reliable
- A mujtahid’s book of legal opinions

As such, even though Ayatollah Khamenei has produced no written record on the religious prohibitions pertaining to nuclear weapons, his verbal statements on the subject are considered his religious opinions, or fatwas, and therefore binding on believers.

The Dynamism of Fatwas

Changing a fatwa is a common practice among Shia mujtahids. Ayatollah Khomeini, one of the most widely followed mujtahids of his time, changed his fatwas on many issues. In his book *Kashf al-Asrar* (The Revelation of the Secrets), published in 1944, he defended the monarchy as a model of government, writing, “The clergy never opposed the principle of the Sultanate. It even supported monarchy most of the time.” But later, while in exile in Najaf and seeking to oppose the shah, he reversed course on his initial opinion, arguing that the sultanate (monarchy) “is against Islam; it violates

the Islamic model for government and its rules.” While still a modest cleric and not yet a national leader, Khomeini stated that both the modern tax system in Iran—which included taxes beyond those sanctioned by Islam—and mandatory military service were against Islam.

But decades later, when he came to power, the ayatollah issued a fatwa instructing that all citizens obey all the government’s laws, adding that even “respecting driving rules and signs is a religious duty.” In general, the 1979 Islamic Revolution presented Khomeini with a challenge rooted in the responsibilities of governance: in some measure, he now had to respect the modern state and its laws. Another reversal by the former Supreme Leader involved women’s rights. In 1963, he issued a fatwa in direct contradiction of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s granting of women’s suffrage. Yet following the revolution, he announced that women had the duty to vote and participate in all elections, and today the Islamic Republic allows women to run in parliamentary and city elections.

Examples abound of reversals by Khomeini. One notable instance involved the lucrative sturgeon trade, which was seen to be at risk. Prior to the revolution, not only Khomeini but all Shia jurists considered the consumption of sturgeon haram; afterward, however, seeking to bolster the industry, Khomeini issued a fatwa declaring sturgeon halal (consumable). Other practices newly permitted after the revolution included autopsies, chess, women on television and in movies, hearing a woman’s voice on radio, and listening to nonreligious music.

Shia mujtahids have differing views on modern warfare, but most do not express these views publicly. On the subject of suicide bombing, the Lebanese cleric Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah claimed in a 2007 interview that Khomeini believed in the legitimacy of the practice but had reservations about announcing this opinion publicly. (Fadlallah himself conceded in the interview that he believed in the religious legitimacy of suicide bombing.) In public, both Supreme Leaders have condemned suicide bombings and the killing of civilians. The concealment of such views by clerics may be done for social or political reasons. A further example of concealment appears in the memoir of Rafsanjani, who mentions an Iranian eye surgeon who resided in the United States and remained a Khomeini

follower. The surgeon asked the leader, through Rafsanjani, if transplanting an eye from a non-Muslim to a Muslim was allowed. Khomeini said yes, but that the surgeon was not to quote Khomeini on this ruling for fear of provoking some of the more conservative mujtahids who disagreed.

In another case, Sadeq Tabatabai, brother-in-law of Khomeini's younger son, Ahmad, cites in his memoir an incident in which he asked Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Khoei whether it was lawful for men to shave their beards. Khoei responded that no religious tenet banned the practice, so Tabatabai asked Khoei why he had written in his book of legal codes that shaving one's beard was not permitted. In reply, "[Khoei] smiled and did not say anything." Temporary marriages between a Muslim man and a Christian or Jewish woman have also been the subject of implicit clerical approval. Ayatollah Hossein Boroujerdi, the foremost marja in Iran until his death in 1961, is known to have backed such a practice, yet he never issued a fatwa on the matter and indeed made efforts to conceal his viewpoint. One possible explanation is that at one time Muhammad Reza Shah wanted to marry a non-Muslim woman, and Ayatollah Boroujerdi did not want to legitimize such a union. Moreover, a former student of Boroujerdi remembers once asking him why he changed his fatwas so frequently. "Every day I am a new man," Boroujerdi replied.

Regarding weapons of mass destruction, even if one disputes the Islamic legality of using WMD, one cannot ignore the Quran's justification for the production of such weapons to terrify an enemy. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi likely used a similar justification to endorse the production of nuclear weapons. In his book *The Islamic Revolution: A Wave of Political Change in History*, he writes:

The most advanced weapons must be produced inside our country even if our enemies don't like it. There is no reason that [our enemies] have the right to produce a special type of weapon, while other countries are deprived of it.

When it comes to the U.S. response, Washington lacks a medium to convey its message to Iranian people. Furthermore, setting up redlines clearly and consistently, along with full, well-thought-out preparation of plausible reactions to any attempts by Iran to even delicately test these redlines, could

help ameliorate the tarnished image of U.S. government propaganda. The structural reimagining of U.S. public diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran would entail, undeniably, the transformation of Voice of America–Persian service into a cutting-edge, twenty-first-century media outlet for today’s highly competitive media market. Voice of America Persian TV suffers from structural problems that have made it the least influential Persian satellite station in Iran. A fundamental reappraisal should address everything from its editorial style to its programs’ formats.

The United States can plant seeds of doubt in the Iranian people’s minds about the domestic propaganda they consume by exploiting factional fissures and constant infighting within the regime elite. This could help loosen official Iranian rhetoric about the United States and the West, bringing to light alternative points of view held by well-known Iranian figures and unveiling the government’s inconsistencies and hypocrisies in dealing with the world’s Muslim- and non-Muslim led governments. Even the apparent unity brought about by the Soleimani killing will undoubtedly give way to the same sort of squabbling that came before.

Khamenei has been the mastermind of information warfare against the United States in the region. Although for years he was worried about the “West’s cultural warfare” and pushed the authorities to counter it, the fact of the matter is that the West did invade Iran culturally through satellite TV in the early 1990s and then through the internet in the early 2000s. Khamenei lost that war to the West, and Iran today has transformed from an ideological-religious state to one that blurs the lines between jihad and secularism.

On September 17, 2013, Khamenei told the Revolutionary Guard commanders that he is not opposed to more flexible engagement with the outside world. “I am not against proper political moves in diplomacy. I believe in what was named many years ago as ‘heroic flexibility,’” he said. Flexibility “in certain circumstances is positive and necessary.” Khamenei, however, also stressed the need to understand the goals of opposing powers. “A wrestler sometimes shows flexibility for technical reasons. But he should not forget who his opponent and enemy is,” he said, according to Iranian news agencies. The supreme leader’s office tweeted a translation of his remarks.

As with his decision during Obama's tenure to invoke "heroic flexibility" in accepting the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Khamenei may in the future be persuaded to talk if circumstances appear to require it, and he has indeed done so with the Biden administration. To put it in vivid terms, in Islamic jurisprudence, eating carrion is not permitted. But according to an Islamic juridical principle, "necessity sanctions an illicit [act]," such as for a person who finds nothing else to eat and faces death. Therefore, just as a dying person can justify eating carrion, an Islamic Republic near collapse or paralysis can justify engaging in talks with an unsavory actor.

Further, Khamenei advised Iranians to evaluate the controversy over Tehran's nuclear program in the context of challenges from "tyrannical governments" and "predatory international networks." Khamenei referred to the United States and the West as "alarmist" elsewhere in his comments. Of course, only the Supreme Leader can make this call in the end. Khamenei may thus, whatever his disdain for this U.S. administration and those before it, see negotiation as the final hope for saving the regime from an existential crisis. The Soleimani killing and the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy did not preclude such a development. Actually, contrary to common wisdom, Khamenei likely views capitulation to Obama's or Biden's pressure as more painful than to Trump's, based on the idea that brandished aggression is preferable to concealed aggression.

In a televised speech on September 5, 2019, Khamenei emphasized the fundamental sameness of Obama and Trump: "The difference between Obama and Trump is only that Obama has hidden his iron hand under a velvet glove while Trump's iron hand is bare. Such bareness is much better for us." While insisting "there is no reason to negotiate with Trump," Shariatmadari—noted earlier for implying that Trump was hardly crazy—said that Iran had no preference in the 2020 U.S. election, Democrat or Republican: "They are the same," he said. In an editorial in Iran's *Kayhan* newspaper, Shariatmadari argued extensively that Obama was even worse than Trump, because "among the presidents of the United States since [Iran's 1979] revolution, Obama has imposed and implemented the most sanctions against Iran...no sanction was imposed by Trump except those whose structure

was designed by Obama. Obama never changed the structure of sanctions in the JCPOA.”

If Obama, Trump, and Biden are the same, then all negotiating with the United States is “bargaining with the devil.” If it was permitted in the past, then it can happen again in the future. Iran faces a crisis on multiple levels. Sanctions have decimated its economy; the people of Lebanon and Iraq have protested Iranian incursion into their political systems; the regime has lost its foremost military leader; and popular unrest shook the country in 2022 and beyond. As in its January 2020 strikes on the al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, Iran will engage in aggressive measures to save face and maintain a measure of deterrence. But none of this changes the reality that the country needs urgent help. Negotiations, however distasteful to Iranian elites and however unlikely as of this writing, could help forge a path to a more sustainable future.

Iranian leaders know a victorious Republican president will have much less motivation to talk after the 2024 election. Alternatively, if Iran assesses a decreasing chance for a Republican president, it may still probe opportunities under Biden. Yet Iran, at least under Khamenei, does not seek an encompassing deal aimed at mutual understanding and cultural reconciliation. Such developments are impossible under the Islamic Republic—and, in fact, threaten its very existence. Any deal under the current leadership will be one with the “devil,” the equivalent of “eating carrion.” Only existential necessity justifies dealmaking, and any deal will be transactional, bringing about a bilateral dynamic that includes no peace, but also no war. Such an outcome would allow Tehran to sustain its hostile policy toward Washington and its allies for years to come.

Source Notes

Notes for Chapter 1

- 1 *Khamenei was the fifth child...of Javad Khamenei, an ordinary, pious cleric, and Khadija Mirdamadi, the daughter of a cleric, Ayatollah Hashem Najafabadi Mirdamadi*
For details about Khamenei's personal and political life spanning the period from his birth until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the author draws heavily from the biography released by his office: Hedayatollah Behboodi, *Sharh-e Easm: Zendeginame-ye Ayatollah Seyed Alai Hosseini Khamenei* (Tehran: Moassesse-ye Motaleat va Pazhoheshha-ye Siasi, 1391 [2012]), 757.
- 2 *Why has the Islamist state that controls Iran endured for so long?*
This and the next several paragraphs are adapted from Mehdi Khalaji, "Observations on the Islamic State in Iran," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, July 17, 2020, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/observations-on-the-islamic-state-in-iran>.
- 3 *In October of 2019, facing protests that swept the country*
"U.S. Confirms Report Citing Iran Officials as Saying 1,500 Killed in Protests," Voice of America, updated December 23, 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_voa-news-iran_us-confirms-report-citing-iran-officials-saying-1500-killed-protests/6181546.html.
- 4 *"Without jihadist action and revolutionary work"*
Islamic Republic News Agency, "Jihadist Work in the Eyes of the Leader of the Revolution" (in Persian), <https://bit.ly/3XTSjfY>.
- 5 *"Sometimes key think tanks and cultural and political institutions fall into disarray and stagnation"*
Khamenei's comment is available at Radio Farda: "'Fire at Will' Not Anarchy," July 26, 2017, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khamenei-fire-at-will/28579927.html>.
- 7 *"Islamic civilization: this is the objective of the Islamic Republic of Iran."*
This and the next paragraph are adapted from Khalaji, "Observations on the Islamic State in Iran," <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/observations-on-the-islamic-state-in-iran>.
- 9 *"Nazism and Bolshevism owe more to Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism"*
This comes from Arendt's classic work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, originally published in 1951.

- 9 *“Iranian leaders should be audacious enough to declare that the existing government is neither a republic nor Islamic”*
For Montazeri’s comment, see Khalaji, “Observations on the Islamic State in Iran,” cited earlier.
- 11 *“Who are mostazafan?”*
For Khamenei’s comments on this concept, which translates as “downtrodden,” see his August 28, 2019, address to the Basij: full transcript available at <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=44267>, cited in Khalaji, “Observations on the Islamic State in Iran,” <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/observations-on-the-islamic-state-in-iran>. For Hossein Nejat’s reaction to the October 2019 protests, see the BBC Persian report, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50917945>, cited in Khalaji, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/observations-on-the-islamic-state-in-iran>.
the “totalitarian dynamic” has visibly intensified in the Islamic Republic
See Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 469. Khamenei’s quotes in this paragraph are cited in detail in the author’s “Observations on the Islamic State”; for the source texts, see <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=44267> and <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50917945>.
- 18 *in a few of their books, these scholars wrote about signs that would accompany the end of days*
See these two traditional texts, which typically lack publication dates or other identifying information: *al-Malahim wal-Fitan* (Disturbances and Turmoil; or, The Battle of Trials); and *al-Fitan wa Ashrat al-Saah* (The Turbulence and Conditions of the Last Hour), the latter pertaining to portents before the end of days.
- 21 *Arbain is a global ceremony*
Office of the Supreme Leader, “Statements in the Foreign Jurisprudence Course About the Arbain Walk” (in Persian), <https://bit.ly/3JdHpxQ>.

Notes for Chapter 2

- 28 *Although some estimates suggest his wealth exceeds \$90 billion*
For Khamenei’s financial standing, see, e.g., Steve Stecklow, Babak Dehghanpisheh, and Yeganeh Torbati, “Khamenei Controls Massive Financial Empire Built on Property Seizures,” Reuters, November 11, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>.
- 33 *in two books published by the [Hojjatieh] association*
A source discussing these two Hojjatieh texts can be found here: Emad Baghi, *Dar Shenakht-e Hezbe Ghedin-e Zaman* (Qom: Nashr Danesh Eslami, 1363 [1985]).

Notes for Chapter 3

- 46 *“Sholokhov is a character very much like you”*
For the Supreme Leader as a reader, see “Novels Read by Ayatollah Khamenei,” Mashregh News, August 19, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3R8XeaU>.
- 48 *Such an address to Akhavan in particular...was understood as a declaration of war against uncommitted cultural producers*
Dark chapters in the regime’s past are discussed in Muhammad Sahimi, “The Chain Murders: Killing Dissidents and Intellectuals, 1988–1998,” *Frontline*, PBS, January 5, 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/the-chain-murders-killing-dissidents-and-intellectuals-1988-1998.html>.

Notes for Chapter 4

- 57 *Tabasi, like Khamenei, started his political activity following Navvab Safavi’s 1951 speech in Mashhad*
The online source for this historical detail is no longer available.

Notes for Chapter 5

- 72 *Montazeri thus began several years under house arrest*
For Montazeri’s speech, see YouTube video (in Persian), 9:59, posted by “opportunity,” September 15, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hW049-6PRs>.
In his book Theosophy and Government, Mehdi Haeri Yazdi
The Persian-language version of Yazdi’s text is available at <https://kadivar.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Hekmat-va-Hokoumat.pdf>.
- 73 *Abdulkarim Soroush...published his magnum opus*
For the associated debate, see Hossein Kamali, “The Theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religion,” review draft, February 1995, http://www.drSORoush.com/English/On_DrSoroush/E-CMO-19950200-1.html.
- 74 *Khomeini reacted strongly to this consequential implication in an open letter, accusing Khamenei of misunderstanding the essential principle that the Supreme Leader’s authority supersedes any law*
For the Khomeini-Khamenei exchange, see “Friday Prayer Sermons in Tehran” (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, October 11, 1988, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=21501>; “Letter to Mr. Khamenei (Determining the Limits of Islamic Government’s Authority)” (in Persian), Imam-Khomeini.ir, January 16, 1988, <https://bit.ly/3HTE2cX>.
- 75 *He even once briefly stopped over in the United States*

The UN General Assembly visit is referenced, e.g., in Shaul Bakhash, “Iran at the UN from Khamenei to Rouhani,” *Foreign Policy*, September 19, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/19/iran-at-the-un-from-khamenei-to-rouhani/>.

Notes for Chapter 6

- 87 *In addition to asking Iran's academic and clerical establishment for feedback... Khamenei ordered government branches...to turn the document's goals into operational plans*

This section is adapted from Mehdi Khalaji, “Iran’s Anti-Western ‘Blueprint’ for the Next Fifty Years,” PolicyWatch 3028, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 24, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-anti-western-blueprint-next-fifty-years>.

Notes for Chapter 7

- 99 *Descended from a Zoroastrian family...Ali Reza Arafī is one of Khamenei's closest confidants*

This section is adapted from Mehdi Khalaji, *The Shiite Clergy Post-Khamenei: Balancing Authority and Autonomy*, Research Note 37 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-clergy-post-khamenei-balancing-authority-and-autonomy>.

- 102 *“Especially since Najaf had its own problems at that time and many Arab countries did not have a good political relationship with the Islamic Republic”*

The source for this quote has requested anonymity.

- 107 *In clerical tradition, leading an advanced course on fiqh or usul suggests the teacher is a mujtahid, faqih, or an ayatollah*

This section is adapted from Khalaji, *The Shiite Clergy Post-Khamenei*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shiite-clergy-post-khamenei-balancing-authority-and-autonomy>.

- 110 *Taghavi's deputy on provincial affairs says there are demands for holding Friday prayer in a hundred more cities*

Tasnim News Agency, “The Number of Cities with Friday Imams Has Reached 900,” <https://bit.ly/3HzkPyn>.

- 111 *the former head, Hojatoleslam Hossein Taeb, was arrested in 2022*

For the arrest, see Farnaz Fassihī and Ronen Bergman, “Israel’s Spies Have Hit Iran Hard. In Tehran, Some Big Names Have Paid a Price,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/middleeast/israel-iran-spy-chief.html>.

Notes for Chapter 8

- 127 *From Kuwait and other Gulf countries to Lebanon, the Supreme Leader has already taken control*
 For a deeper read considering the Lebanese context, see Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, Policy Focus 59 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2006), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3502?disposition=inline>.
- 130 *"It is possible that some people...do not want to support the Islamic Republic regime but obviously want to support their country"*
 "Leader's Speech in Meeting with People from Different Social Backgrounds," Khamenei.ir, June 12, 2013, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1848/Leader-s-Speech-in-Meeting-with-People-from-Different-Social>.
If anyone is not completely happy with the Islamic regime
 "Leader's Speech to Judiciary Officials," Khamenei.ir, June 26, 2013, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1806/Leader-s-Speech-to-Judiciary-Officials>.
- 131 *Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi...reported that the election discord left the association on the verge of a split*
 Iranian Labor News Agency, "Mesbah-Yazdi's New Strategy for the Elections" (in Persian), September 15, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3I15INk>.
- 132 *He now enjoys the final say on many issues, especially when it comes to foreign policy*
 "'Rises and Falls' of the Islamic Revolution" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, n.d., <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=1025>.
- 136 *He was heavily influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood theoretician Sayyid Qutb*
 "Sayyid Qutb's 'Fi Zhalal al-Quran,'" translated by Grand Ayatollah Khamenei," KhameneiBook.ir, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3RWiLE3>.
As the revolution consolidated its position...Khamenei identified with the right wing
 "Conquering America's Espionage" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, November 7, 2019, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=43920>.
- 137 *When Khamenei became Supreme Leader, he bowed to political realities*
 On Khamenei's concessions to political reality, see Mehdi Khalaji, *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions*, Policy Focus 126 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2014), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4070>.
- 139 *Such precedents suggest that were Khamenei to experience serious health problems, the public would not know about them*
 Hossein Bastani, "The Last Decisions of 'Wali Faqih'—Between the Lines," BBC, October 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-63108174>.
But much evidence suggests his influence has not diminished the role within the office of other individuals
 The letters of former parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi are instructive here: see Farnoosh Amirshahi, "Cherub; Two Fateful Letters, an Eleven-Year Path,"

- BBC, April 15, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/04/160415_fa_karoubi_letters_last11years.
- 140 *The Shirazi family's relationship with Khamenei*
For Shirazi's work on the Islamic Republic's founder, see Ali Shirazi, *A Ray of the Sun's Light: Stories from the Life of the Supreme Leader* (in Persian), KhameneiBook.ir, 2013, <https://bit.ly/40Iv5fj>; and "A Sincere Word with the President," available at <https://bit.ly/3jUD8F9>.
- 142 *Khamenei usually trusts low-ranking clerics*
"Statements During the Large Gathering at Qom" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, October, 19, 2010, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10302>.
- 152 *Ahmadinejad took aim*
"Iran in the Past Week" (in Persian), BBC, July 8, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/07/110708_l44_iran_past_week_17tir.
- 153 *The dynamic between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad*
"Full Text of the President's Nowruz Message on the Occasion of the Beginning of 1392 [2013]" (in Persian), *Hamshahri Online*, <https://bit.ly/3xjIpt3>.
President Khatami sent a bill to the Majlis
Iranian Students News Agency, "Kashani to Candidates: It Is Not Within Your Power to Discuss Communicating with America" (in Persian), May 13, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3IfES5i>; "Rafsanjani: Without the Approval of the Leadership, My Coming Will Have the Opposite Result" (in Persian), Radio Farda, May 16, 2013, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/o2_hashemi_election_supreme_leader/24977519.html.
- 154 *"Abolishing the people's elected president"*
See "Statements in the Meeting with Kermanshah Students" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, July 24, 2011, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17597>; "Some People Distorted the Words of the Leader" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, September 6, 2011, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=18082>; and "Iranian Parliament Member: Some People Believe There Is No Need for a President" (in Persian), BBC, updated September 30, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/09/110921_l39_katouzian_president_prime-minister.
But the very fact that Khamenei voiced an implicit wish to abolish
For the sometimes troubled relationship between the Supreme Leader and the president, see "Review of Tehran's Newspapers, March 6, 2013" (in Persian), Iraniuk, <http://bit.ly/3YsULLs>.
- 155 *The rest rely on Khamenei for their authority*
For the Majlis that convened in 2012, see "Ali Larijani: The Parliament Is Committed to Obeying the Leadership" (in Persian), Radio Farda, December 6, 2012, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_larijani_parliament_oblige_leader_order/24791037.html.

- 156 *In his 2011 book, National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy, Hassan Rouhani*
Rouhani's nuclear memoir topped a thousand pages and was published by Iran's Center for Strategic Research.
- 157 *enrichment and nuclear issues*
For nuclear discussions, see: "Leader's Speech to Government Officials," Khamenei.ir, July 24, 2012, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1655/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials>; "Interior Minister Khatami: The Nuclear Program Was Under the Leader's Direct Management" (in Persian), BBC, July 30, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2012/07/120730_l39_mousavi-lari_nuclear_khamenei.
Although Khamenei may not have been happy
See the previously cited story on Khatami; also "Commentary on the Words of Dr. Ali Bagheri, Assistant to Dr. Jalili at Tehran University" (in Persian), Information Base of Dr. Saeed Jalili (nuclear negotiator). The link is no longer available.
- 158 *In 2012, rumors circulated that Rafsanjani would be replaced*
On Khamenei taking sides for political advantage, see "Friday Sermons in Tehran" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, April 9, 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7190>.
- 160 *The "military" here could be seen as signaling the IRGC*
"Hashemi Rafsanjani: The Leadership Does Not Trust Me..." (in Persian), BBC, April 16, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/04/130416_ir92_hashemi_khamenei_election.
- 161 *"How is it possible for...an individual or an organization that regards itself as the guardian of a living and dynamic entity called the Islamic Revolution"*
"The IRGC's Response to Threats Is Not to Enter Forbidden Territory" (in Persian), Magiran, June 9, 2013, <https://www.magiran.com/article/2748111>.
- 162 *In operating through Khamenei, Rouhani helped the Supreme Leader*
"Statements in the Meeting of 50,000 Basij Commanders" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, November 20, 2013, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24552>.
- 163 *for now, Khamenei's model of operating through strategic appointments*
"Statements in the Meeting of Students" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, November 20, 2013, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24378>.

Notes for Chapter 9

- 165 *"Safeguarding the regime is a religious duty"*
"Response to Ayatollah Montazeri's Resignation from the Post of Deputy Leader" (in Persian), available at Faqhat School Library, October 23, 1989, <https://lib.eshia.ir/50080/21/112>.

- 167 *"To enlighten the minds of American officials"*
 "Statements in the Meeting of Air Force Commanders and Employees"
 (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, February 8, 2019, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=41630>.
- 168 *he called Joe Biden a "hungry wolf" and said Democrats planned to infiltrate the Islamic Republic's ranks*
 For the regime's vilification of both U.S. parties, see "Statements in the First Meeting of the President and Members of the Thirteenth Delegation" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, August 27, 2021, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=48588>.
as a "sign" of diminishing U.S. authority and "America's economic demise"
 As originally discussed in Mehdi Khalaji, *Reading Trump in Tehran*, Policy Note 76 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reading-trump-tehran>; for the source: "Statements on the Thirtieth Anniversary of Khomeini's Death" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, June 4, 2019 <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=42758>.
- 169 *"Don't make an effort in groundless planning...the demise of America is a reality"*
 "Statements in the Meeting of Students" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=40833>.
- 170 *"The one who was more candid"*
 "People of Isfahan Meeting with the Leader of the Revolution" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, November 3, 2018, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=34893>.
- 170 *"Certainly, we are grateful to this newly arrived man"*
 "The Meetings of Air Force Commanders and Staff with the Commander-in-Chief" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, February 7, 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=35561>.
- 171 *"Iran must not let them get close"*
 See the author's *Reading Trump in Tehran*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reading-trump-tehran>; for the source, see "Thirtieth Anniversary of Khomeini's Death," <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=42758>.
Among the issues "no less important than war"
 "Statements in the Meeting of the President and Members of the Assembly of Experts" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, September 21, 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37721>.
- 173 *"you heard the American president's words, ridiculous and thoughtless talk"*
 "Statements at Farhangian University" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, June 9, 2018, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=39542>.
negotiation with the United States "is truly fruitless"
 See, e.g., "President and Assembly of Experts" (in Persian), <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37721>; and "Statements in the Meeting

of Students” (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, September 21, 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=43896>.

“Trump is stupid, but...he is not insane.”

For closer reads on Iranian assessments of Trump, see “Hassan Rouhani: If There Were Another President in America, We Would Negotiate” (in Persian), Radio Farda, November 4, 2019, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/rohani-in-kerman-on-oil-saling-problems/30265883.html>; “Do Not Hesitate: Close the Strait of Hormuz” (in Persian), Magiran, <https://www.magiran.com/article/3885337>; and “Rouhani: Trump’s Personality Has Made It Difficult for the Whole World” (in Persian), *Akharinkhabar*, October 15, 2019, <https://akharinkhabar.ir/politics/5730308>.

176 *“People should not worry about war”*

“Shariatmadari: Trump Is the American Version of Gorbachev” (in Persian), *Magiran*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.magiran.com/article/3508225>;

Islamic Republic News Agency, “Effects of the Congress of Student Martyrs in Qom Province” (in Persian), October 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3YLPgXI>.

“Trump is a businessman”

See the author’s *Reading Trump in Tehran*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reading-trump-tehran>, as well as “Rouhani: Trump Knows Nothing About Politics” (in Persian), *DID Press*, July 2018, <http://bit.ly/3IjoZuI>.

According to reports from domestic media after the first round of meetings with the U.S. team in Vienna

For the negotiations, see Karen DeYoung, “Officials Report Progress at Iran Nuclear Talks in Vienna,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-iran-nuclear-talks-vienna-progress/2021/04/19/1322a88a-a13b-11eb-a7ee-949c574a09ac_story.html.

Notes for Chapter 10

178 *“sometimes all members of the enemy, including women and men, young and old, are involved in the invasion”*

Available at “Noormags” (in Persian), <https://bit.ly/3jV3NBS>.

Such language would not seem to pose much of a barrier

“Representative of Zoroastrians in Islamic Council Protested Calling Non-Muslims ‘Animals’ by Ayatollah Jannati” (in Persian), Radio Farda, December 1, 2005, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/313630.html>.

179 *“This verse includes defensive as well as offensive jihad”*

This content and the next section are adapted from Mehdi Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Politics*, Policy Focus 79 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2008), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/apocalyptic-politics-rationality-iranian-policy>; for an

original source, see Ayatollah Montazeri's site, "Jihad and Defense Issues" (in Persian), n.d., <https://amontazeri.com/book/resaleh/342>.

180 *Khamenei's nuclear fatwa is consistent*

"Statements in Friday Prayer Sermons" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, October 27, 2005, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3258>.

185 *"There are no victories"*

Mehr News Agency, "Full Text of Imam Khomeini's Letter on Reasons for Accepting Resolution 598 to End the War" (in Persian), September 29, 2006, <https://bit.ly/3HSjz8l>.

187 *He does not mention producing or stockpiling*

Khamenei suggested in a speech that Muammar Qadhafi had created his own dilemma during the Arab Spring uprisings by previously relinquishing his nuclear weapons. See transcript of the March 21, 2011, speech at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=11804>, as cited in Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy* (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2011), 25, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nuclear-fatwa-religion-and-politics-irans-proliferation-strategy>.

188 *To buttress his argument Tabatabai mentions actions committed by the Prophet Muhammad in his war*

See Sheikh Muhammad ibn Hasan Tusi, *al-Mabsout fil Fiqh*, vol. 2 (Qom: al-Maktaba al-Murtazaviya, 1388 [2010]), 11, as cited in Eisenstadt and Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa*, 25–26, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nuclear-fatwa-religion-and-politics-irans-proliferation-strategy>.

Index

- Abadi, Nematollah Salehi Najaf, 9, 108
- Abi-Talib, Ali ibn, 14
- Abwab al-Hoda* (The Doors of Guidance) (Isfahani), 30
- Adel, Gholam Ali Haddad, 33
- Afghanistan, 41, 103, 105, 156, 182
- Against Western Civilization* (Qutb), 37
- Ahmad, Jalal al-e, 42–44, 52
- on ideology of modernization, 44
 - “Westoxication,” 168
- Ahmadinejad, Davoud, 25
- Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud, 16, 25, 149, 155, 162
- challenging the Supreme Leader’s authority, 153
 - economic privileges offered to Khamenei after victory in election, 151
 - failure in ending factionalism, 118
 - against Iran’s nuclear policy, 156
 - mass protests after disputed 2009 reelection, 118
 - opposition to Moslehi, 152
 - outrage toward United States, 175
 - refusal to attend the Expediency Council’s meetings, 158
 - revolutionary ideology of, 17
 - use of *estekhareh* in decisionmaking, 22–23
 - victory in election, 150
- Akhavan-Sales, Mehdi, 48
- Alam, Asadollah, 38
- Ameli, Sayyed Mesbah, 104
- And Quiet Flows the Don* (Sholokhov), 47
- Aqai, Masoud Pour Sayyed, 25
- Arafi, Ali Reza, 97, 99–106, 114, 116
- Araki, Muhammad Ali, 69, 70
- Arani, Taqi, 43, 56
- Ardebili, Abdul Karim Mousavi, 71, 74, 76, 138, 139

Note: Page numbers in italics refer to figures.

- Arendt, Hannah, 9, 12
- Aria, Amir Mansour, 151
- Ashouri, Habibollah, 46
- Askari, Ali ibn Muhammad, 14
- Assembly of Experts, 1, 147, 191
 - approving Hossein Ali Montazeri as official successor to Supreme Leader, 80
 - debate over presidential vs. parliamentary system held in, 154
 - emergency session after the death of Khomeini, 82
 - Khamenei convincing influential ayatollahs belonging to, 84
 - mujtahid* position in, 68
 - role in appointment of the Supreme Leader, 92
 - Tabasi, member of, 58
- Ataturk, Mustafa Kemal, 53
- atheism:
 - Arafi's remarks, 114
 - materialism and, 43
- autocracy, political system as, 90–94
- Azghadi, Hassan Rahimpour, 31
- Bagheri, Mohammad Mehdi Mir, 104
- Bahai/"Bahaism":
 - faith, 31, 33, 35, 114, 134, 135
 - idiosyncrasy, 32
 - teachings, 31
- Bahjat, Muhammad Taqi, 21, 70
- Bahonar, Muhammad Javad, 149
- Bani Abbas dynasty, 14
- Bani Umayyah dynasty, 14
- Baqeri, Ali, 157
- Baqi, Emad: *The Last Ambassador of the Revolution and Waiting and Seeds of Revolution*, 33
- Basij militia ("The Basij Resistance Force of Mostazafan"), 2, 11, 87, 159
 - enlisted to criticize Rafsanjani's cultural and economic policies, 150
 - Mojtaba gaining power from, 139
 - report on jihadist groups in Pakistan formed by graduates, 103
 - students, 47
- Basij Mostazafan (organization), 160
- Biden, Joe, 172, 176, 198
- bin Laden, Osama, 4

- Biniaz, Ali Reza, 102
 Biuki, Abolfazl Mousavi, 176
 Bolton, John, 167
 Boroujerdi, Hossein, 50, 195
 Burke, Edmund, 12
 Bush, George W., 25
- Center for Management of Seminaries (*Markez-e Mudiriati Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), 105
 Center for Seminary Service (*Markez-e Khedmat-e Howzeh-haye Elmieh*), 109
 Center for the Management of Qom Seminaries, 144–145
 Césaire, Aimé, 44
 Chamran, Mostafa, 33
 Charity Mahdavi Association of Hojjatieh (*Anjoman-e Kheiriya-ye Hojjatieh-ye Mahdaviyya*), 31
 Committee for Friday Prayer, 110
 Committee for Mosque Affairs, 110
 Communist Party, 38
 Communist Revolution, 46–47
 Cook, David, 8
 Council for Managing Non-Iranian Seminary Students' Affairs, 100
 Cramer, Jane K., 167
Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shia Islam (Tabatabai), 15
 crisis of rationality, 107–120
- Dar Fajr-e Sahel* (In the Shore's Dawn) (Hakimi), 30
Dar Khedmat va Khianate Roshanfekran (The Iranian Intellectuals' Treasonous Service) (Ahmad), 43
 Devotees of Islam (*Fedayin-e Islam*), 37
- education in Mashhad, 27–39
 extremists, 29
 Hojjatieh Association (*Anjoman-e Hojjatieh*), 31–34
 political awakening, 35–37
 rise of Khamenei, 37–39
 separationists, 30–31
 velayatis, 34–35
 Eftekharzadeh, Sayyed Hassan, 34
esm-e azam (“greatest name”), 21
The Eternal Martyr (Abadi), 9

Europe, 157

bourgeois culture, 44

clerics, 101

colonial powers, 44

imperialism, 8, 59

Khamenei's warning to, 88

expediency, 165–176

identifying and neutralizing the Western enemy, 166–171

maligning reputation of United States, 172–176

Expediency Council:

Khamenei as head of, 56

Khamenei's relationship to, 157–158

legislation regarding appointment of members, 91

Majlis and Guardian Council, 181

overruling Islamic law or the constitution, 165

substantial structural changes, 95–96

Tabasi appointed by Khamenei as member of, 58

unconstitutional, 94

Fadlallah, Muhammad Hussein, 194

Fanon, Frantz, 44

Far, Hojatoleslam Hossein Tayebi, 111

Fast, Howard, 48

fatwas:

dynamism of, 193–198

issued by Khamenei on WMD use, 180, 184

issued by *marjas*, 147

issued by *mujtahids*, 192, 193

Khamenei's right to publish, 88

Khamenei's unorthodox, 7

not issued by Khomeini against nuclear weapons, 185

for prisoners issued by Khomeini, 129

regarding nuclear policy, 92

against Salman Rushdie issued by Khomeini, 67, 136

Ferdowsi, 41

fiqh, 4, 72, 106–107

Forbes, 28

foreigners:

ideological training in Iran, 100

infidels and, 5

- in Iran, 54
- in seminaries, 144
- steps taken by Reza Shah to minimize influence of, 54
- Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, 145
- Freund, Julien, 43–44
- Fukuyama, Francis, 169
- The Future Belongs to Islam* (Qutb), 7, 58
- The Future Is for Islam* (Qutb), 37

- Gerami, Muhammad Ali, 22
- ghazal, 41, 48, 189
- Global Center for Islamic Sciences, 100
- Gohar Shad Mosque, 36, 133–134
- Golpayegani, Gholam Hossein Mohammadi, 28
- Golpayegani, Mohammad Mohammadi, 139
- Golpayegani, Muhammad Reza, 9, 68–70, 146
- Gorbachev, Mikhail, 175
- governmental clergy, 141–142
- Gozinesh Law, 172
- The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck), 48
- Guardian Council, 39, 147, 165
 - disputes between the Majlis and, 95, 157, 181
 - jurists, 65
 - legislative decisions, 119
 - modification of law by, 91
 - officials of the Assembly of Experts, vetted by, 92
 - position in the constitution, 68
- guerrilla clerics, 144

- Haghanian, Vahid, 139
- Hajizadeh, Ali Reza, 107
- Hajizadeh, Amir Ali, 176
- Hakimi, Ali, 30
- Hakimi, Muhammad, 30–31
 - Dar Fajr-e Sahel* (In the Shore's Dawn), 30
- Hakimi, Muhammad Reza, 30–31
- Halabi, Sheikh Mahmoud, 30, 31–32, 34
- Hamadani, Hossein Nouri, 104
- haram* (forbidden), 42, 187, 189, 194
- Haramain Sharifain (holy cities of Mecca and Medina), 6

- Hashemi, Mehdi, 9
- Havel, Vaclav, 2
- “Hazrat-e Agha” (His Lordship; title for Supreme Leader), 28
- Hejazi, Asghar Mir, 139
- Hidden Imam:
- Ahmadinejad as representative of, 16
 - believers in *estekhareh* seeking responses from, 23
 - Halabi’s view on, 32
 - Hojjatieh defending Shia Islam by emphasizing, 31
 - as illegal, 35
 - infallible, 92
 - petitions and money for, 24
 - Shia apocalyptic tradition, 18
 - Shia classical tradition, 17
 - Twelver Shia, 9
- Hojjatieh Association (*Anjoman-e Hojjatieh*), 31–35
- Holy Precinct, 57, 58
- Hosseini, Sayyed Mehdi, 103–104
- House of Islamic Propaganda (*Dar al-Tabligh*), 143
- House of the Leader (*Bayt-e Rahbar*), 139
- Hussein, Imam, 6, 20
- ideology (martyrdom), 21
- Hussein, Saddam, 73
- anti-Shia policy in Iraq, 128
 - nation’s air force and surface-to-surface missiles against Iran, 184
- Ibrahimi, Hojatoleslam Muhammad Hassan, 103
- ijtihad* (clerical judgments), 21, 68–70, 72–73, 80, 192
- Ilyin, Ivan, 166
- Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Higher Educational Complex, 103
- Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini Seminary, 102
- Imam Hussein Squadron, 111
- Imam Jafar Sadeq 83 Independent Brigade, 111, 144
- “Imamology,” 14
- Imam Reza Shrine, 24, 57, 58, 145
- Infallible Imam, 192
- Institute for Language and Cultural Studies, 101
- Institute of Ishraq and Irfan, 100
- Intelligence Protection Organization, 111
- Iran-Iraq War, 81, 95, 115, 149, 166, 180, 184

Iraq:

- American frustration in, 174
- Kufa, 6
- marjaiya* in, 126
- Najaf seminary in, 1, 122
- political implications of decline of *marjaiya* in, 126–130
- restriction of Iraqi *mujtahids* by Iranian authority in, 127
- Shia, 174
- strikes on al-Asad Air Base in, 198
- IRGC. *See* Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
- Isfahani, Mirza Mehdi Gharavi, 31, 49
 - Abwab al-Hoda* (The Doors of Guidance), 30
 - Mesbah al-Hoda* (The Light of Guidance), 30
- Islamic Development Organization, 110
- Islamic-Iranian Blueprint for Progress, 87
- Islamic Liberation Movements Unit (*Vahed-e Nehzat-haye Azadi Bakhsh*), 10
- Islamic Republic Party, 56, 60, 140
- Islamic Revolution (1979), 1, 3–4, 6, 11, 35, 58, 63
 - clerical establishment, 142
 - compared with Russian October revolution, 46–47
 - defending the theory of revolutionary regime, 7
 - described by Khamenei, 6
 - emergence of women clergy before, 106–107
 - empowerment of clerics and, 54
 - “new time,” 7
 - political protest against “the Imperialism,” 20
 - superiority and necessity of, 10
- Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), vii, 11, 12, 28, 57, 88, 111, 117–119, 131–133, 140, 151, 152, 155, 156, 176, 182, 185, 188, 205
 - Khamenei’s relationship with, 159–163
- The Islamic Revolution: A Wave of Political Change in History* (Mesbah-Yazdi), 195
- Islamic State, 4, 89, 169
- Islam/Islamic, 3
 - apocalypticism and, 8
 - Bahai teachings in, 31
 - civilization, 7
 - colonialism impact on, 25
 - ideology, 108, 114, 136, 173
 - jurisprudence, 178

- Marxist reading of, 46
- mysticism, 27, 114
- nuclear weapons and, 179–182
- philosophy, 27, 50
- rituals, 19
- Shariati's interpretation of, 45
- theology, 19, 50
- WMD forbidden by, 188–190
- Islamism:
 - imperialist expansionism, 9
 - institutionalization in Iran, 3
 - modern, 4
 - as modern ideology, 63
 - revolutionary, 13
 - Shia, 13
- Islamists, 42
 - ideology of, 13, 46
 - leftist students, 63
 - Marxists and, 42, 44
 - power to fight United States and Israel, 10
 - principal goal, 92
 - pro-Khomeini, 64
 - religious revolutionaries between leftists and, 63
 - secular leftists allied with, 46
- Islamization:
 - failure in Iranian life, 89
 - of Iranian life, 89
 - leading to clericalization, 65
 - of universities, 99
- al-Islam Tabarsi, Amin, 191
- Israel:
 - Islamists against, 10
 - Jafarian statements about destruction of, 23
 - jihad, 3
 - occupation of Muslim holy lands in, 25
 - provoking Muslims to fight for annihilation of, 8, 59
- Jabari, Hossein, 141
- Jafari, Gholam Reza Shah, 104
- Jafarian, Rasul, 23

- Jalili, Saeed, 156
 Jamali, Hojatoleslam Mohammad, 111
 Jamkaran Mosque, 23–24
 Jamshidi, Mahmoud Reza, 106
 Janbazan and Mostazafan Foundation, 138
 Jannati, Ayatollah Ahmad, 178
 Jazayeri, Masoud, 161
 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 173, 197–198
 Junger, Ernst, 44
- Kabirian, Muhammad Hossein, 106
 Kadivar, Mohsen, 108
 Kafi, Sheikh Ahmad, 34
 Karbala, battle of, 20
 Karbaschi, Gholam Reza, 150
 Kashani, Muhammad Emami, 153
Kashfal-Asrar (Revelation of Secrets) (Khomeini), 193
Kayhan, 42
 Khamenei, Ali, 76
 advisors of, 139–142
 animosity toward Democrats, 168
 appointing Ali Shirazi as representative in IRGC Navy and Qods Force,
 140
 appointing Tabasi to Expediency Council, 58
 appointment to the position of Supreme Leader, 66, 67, 117
 attitude toward Iran's nuclear program, 177
 authorizing security forces to “fire at will,” 5
 awareness of seizure of U.S. embassy in Tehran, 63, 133
 book of fatwas and courses on jihad, 7
 centralization of the seminary bureaucracy, 144
 vs. clergy, 142–148
 close relationship with Abbas Vaez Tabasi, 57
 cofounding Islamic Republic Party, 56, 60
 compared with Ayatollah Khomeini, 27
 concept of great jihad introduced by, 5
 concept of managerial jihad, 10
 denying accusations that Iran is producing WMD, 186
 direct order for house arrest of Montazeri, 9
 distribution of wealth, 151–152
 election to the post of Supreme Leader, 82–83

enlisting both Islamist and leftist propaganda, 135–136
 establishing *Jamaat al-Urwat al-Wothqa* in Pakistan, 103
 establishing Office of the Supreme Leader, 117, 139
estekhareh, 2
 factionalist, 152–154
 failure to reconstruct unity of the religious authority, 73
 fascination regarding arcane sciences and *muqaddisin*, 2
 fascination with mystical Islamic practices and rituals, 29
 donning of *labbadeh*, 71
 focused on idea of martyrdom, 6
 compelled by his father to become a cleric, 49
 as head of Supreme Defense Council, 73–74
 love of Persian literature, 2, 29, 49
ijtihad of, 69
 influence in Iraq, 126
 interest in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, 49, 50
 introduced to Khomeini in Qom, 1
 introduced to Muslim Brotherhood ideology through Fedayin-e Islam, 56
 involved in military affairs, 73–75
 on Islamic civilization, 7, 89
 on Islamic Revolution, 6
 jihad model of regime preservation, 10
 as leader of Islamic world, 128
 lecture on Islamic ideology, 46
 meeting with Basij militia students, 47
 meeting with Hossein Ali Montazeri, 76
 as member of Revolutionary Council, 60
 message delivered to Association of Muslim Students in Europe, 7
 no written record on religious prohibitions, 193
 not happy with Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, 67
 not welcoming military confrontation, 16
 offensive war (*jihad-e ebtedayi*), 7
 official visit to Qom, 97
 oral fatwa forbidding WMD, 180
 order for creation of Sadra Islamic Theosophy Foundation, 51
 perception of himself, 140
 personal representative of, 119
 vs. political institutions, 154–158
 political activism of, 37–39
 poor education in philosophy and mysticism, 50

position in Ministry of Defense, 73
 positions within and relationship with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), 73, 119, 133, 159–163, 196
 on power of *velayat-e faqih*, 4–5
 prejudices and perceptions about all U.S. presidents, 170
vs. the President’s Office, 148–151
 promotion of offensive jihad, 59
 properties of, 28
 provoking Muslims to overthrow pro-Western governments, 8
 publicly cautioning Iranians, 171
 quasi-heretical legitimization of offensive jihad, 8
 question on leadership skills during Assembly of Experts votes, 1
 reading of Iranian and foreign books, 2
 reconceptualization and views of jihad, 4
 relationship with bodyguard Hossein Jabari, 141
 relationship with poetry, 41, 49
 on religious conversions, 45
 role in “political *fiqh*” (Islamic jurisprudence), 4
 role in redefining *mostazafan* protesters, 11
 role in transforming Islamic concept of jihad, 4
 Shirazi family’s relationship with, 140
 speech at the Tehran International Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, 187
 on speech by Navvab Safavi, 56
 on speech by Trump at the UN General Assembly, 173
 statement titled “The Second Phase of Revolution: A Statement Addressed to the Nation” issued by, 6
 substantial structural changes in Expediency Council, 96–97
 teaching Marxist-influenced Islamic ideology, 37
 early theological education at Mashhad seminary, 1–2
 theological education in Najaf (Iraq), 1
 transformation in Iran’s clerical establishment, 97–98
 travel to Mashhad for public speech at Imam Reza Shrine, 57
 travel to Tehran to meet Jalal al-e Ahmad, 42
 against United States, 168, 169
 unorthodox fatwa, 7
 on use of nuclear weapons forbidden in Islam, 187–190
 values of, 137–139
 views of his father, 35
 vision about the Islamic *umma*, 6

- vision and legacy of, 86–87
- warning of ramifications of U.S.-Iran animosity, 64
- worldview containing ideologies represented in Mashhad, 135
- Khamenei, Javad, 1, 35
- Khamenei, Mojtaba, 139
- Kharazi, Kamal, 33
- Khatam al-Anbia, 160
- Khatami, Mohammad, 119, 140, 149, 150, 153, 156–157
- Khazali, Abu al-Qasem, 141
- Khoei, Abu al-Qasem, 70, 72, 146, 185, 195
- Khomeini, Ahmad, 138, 139, 141
- Khomeini, Ruhollah, 27, 72–73, 76, 139, 146, 148, 184
 - affirming Islamic Republic's authority to destroy a mosque, 180–181
 - campaign against Golpayegani after death of, 69
 - changes to financial mechanisms of the seminary, 122
 - death of, 9, 58, 66, 69, 71, 81–83
 - decisionmaking guided by Shia religious law, 185
 - declaration of referendum, 38
 - describing the initial constitution as imperfect, 95
 - doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, 92
 - establishment of the Islamic Republic, 39
 - exile in Iraq, 38
 - fatwa declaring sturgeon halal (consumable), 194
 - formalizing supremacy of *raison d'état* over the tenets of Islam, 181
 - formation of Council of Representatives for Seminarians (*Majmou-ye Nemayandegan-e Tulab va Fozalai-ye Howzeh*), 115–116
 - funeral in Tehran, 70, 82
 - heart attack in 1989, 79, 139
 - with his successor, 61
 - incorporation of *maslaha* into Iranian political system, 95
 - interpretation of Islam, 165
 - interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*, 136
 - issuance of fatwa in 1988 for all prisoners, 129
 - Kashfal-Asrar* (Revelation of Secrets), 193
 - legitimacy as ruling jurist, 143
 - mandate for legislation review, 39
 - on military preparation, 177
 - on modern tax system in Iran, 194
 - Montazeri tension with, 100
 - on offensive jihad, 178–179

- officially appointed as Supreme Leader, 59
- official pronouncements on velayat-e faqih and *maslahat-e nezam*, 79–80
- opposed Hojjatieh, 33
- permitting production and stockpiling of chemical weapons, 185
- health decline, 139
- political theory of, 165
- prohibition of chemical weapons in Islam, 180
- provoking Muslims, 8
- public message to the nation, 34
- radical interpretation of Shia Islam, 10
- role in secularization of *marjaiya* (*marja* status), 123
- shah's government and animosity toward, 32
- study of theology, 41
- success in undermining civil and religious roles of clerical establishment, 174–175
- on telling lies and drinking wine, 191
- on theory of velayat-e faqih, 65
- transformation of *marjaiya*, 65
- vision of the Islamic Republic, 82
- Khorasani, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Vahid, 70, 116
- Khosravi, Mah Afarid, 151

- Lankarani, Muhammad Fazel, 70
- Lari, Abdulvahed Mousavi, 157
- Larijani, Ali, 138, 155
- Larijani, Sadeq, 106
- The Last Ambassador of the Revolution and Waiting and Seeds of Revolution* (Baqi), 33
- Lebanon, 127, 198
 - Hezbollah, 57, 101–102

- Mahdi, Imam, 3, 4, 6, 8, 18, 25
 - birth of, 13–14
 - role in completing Prophet Muhammad's mission of spreading Islam, 14
- Majlis, 24, 56, 91, 155, 181
 - bill sent by President Khatami to, 153
 - Guardian Council dispute with, 95, 157
 - leftist, 154
 - protest by members against Expediency Council, 94
- Marashi Najafi, Shahab al-Din, 70

- marjaiya* (*marja* status), 65, 79, 122
 deterioration of, 124
 end of, 122–125
 Khamenei's claims of, 72
 localization of, 126
 political implications of decline in Iraq, 126–130
 effect of politics on financial resources, 121
- Marvi, Ahmad, 140–141
- Marx, Karl, 24–25
- Marxism/Marxists, 37, 42, 63
 based on materialism and atheism, 43
 ideology of, 43, 45, 55
 influence on clerics and Islamic writers, 43, 56
 reading of Islam, 46
- Mashai, Esfandiar Rahim, 151
- Mashhad, 37–38, 41, 60, 106
 academic agendas of, 27
 anticolonialist sentiment in, 134
 Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation site, 98
 and Basij, 111
 circles and associations devoted to “authentic” Islam, 31
 clergy and seminaries of, 34, 46, 49, 50, 103, 106, 137, 144, 146
 clerics' views on philosophy, 30
 cultural and religious ambience, 30
 cultural center of, 41
 dynamic with Qom, 59–60, 111
estekhareh in, 22
 hometown of Ahmad Marvi, 140
 Imam Reza Shrine in, 24
 Khamenei birthplace, upbringing, education, and returns, 1–2, 41–44,
 53, 57–58, 133–137
 madrasas, 27
 MIU branch in, 102–103
 poetry gatherings in, 36
 political unrest in, 59
 as religious city, 28
 religious extremists, 29
 religious instructors in, 37
 religious schools in, 27
 relocation of Mirza Mehdi Gharavi Isfahani from Najaf to, 30

- resistance faced by Pahlavi for extending state bureaucratic control
 - over religious affairs, 36
- Safavi lecture on implementation of sharia delivered at, 37
- separationists and Shariati, 31
- Shariati raised in, 45
- Shia holy shrines in, 44
- maslahat-e nezam*, 79–80, 82
- Masoumeh, Hazrat-e, 22
- Maududi, Abul Ala, 4–5
- Mesbah al-Hoda* (The Light of Guidance) (Isfahani), 30
- Mesbah-Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi, 21, 99, 131, 190–191
 - The Islamic Revolution: A Wave of Political Change in History*, 195
- Meshkini, Ayatollah Ali, 142
- military affairs, 73–75
- Ministry of Agriculture, Iran, 109
- Ministry of Defense, Iran, 73, 140
- Ministry of Education, Iran, 107, 110, 121, 134
- Ministry of Intelligence, Iran, 34, 110, 139, 144
- Mirdamadi, Hashem Najafabadi, 1
- Mirdamadi, Khadija, 1
- modernization, 44, 64
 - Pahlavi's agenda of, 36, 53–54, 64
 - reforms in Iran, 38
 - secularization policies and, 36, 54
 - Westernization and, 42
- Montazeri, Hossein Ali, 9–10, 71–72, 76
 - acceptance of juridical and theological credentials, 9–10
 - controversy associated with, 9
 - house arrest by direct order of Ali Khamenei, 9
 - interest among youths abroad in studying Shia Islam, 100
 - interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*, 136
 - as official successor to Supreme Leader, 80
 - Khomeini's response on nuclear weapons disclosed in memoirs of, 185
 - on military preparation, 177
 - military responsibility with Rafsanjani, 159
 - protest against government's role in 1988 massacre, 149
 - Resaleh-ye Tozih al-Masael* (Islamic Law Codes), 179
- Morvarid, Hasan Ali, 30
- Moslehi, Haydar, 142, 152
- Mossadeq, Muhammad, 31, 134, 173

- Motahhari, Morteza, 43, 189
- Mousavi, Mir Hossein, 64, 66, 139, 149, 159
- Mujahedin-e Khalq, 33
- mujtahids* (Islamic jurists), 32, 65, 70–71, 81, 92, 107, 122, 181, 192, 194–195
- activities of Iraqi, 127
 - categories of, 125
 - clerics and, 69
 - disagree on lawfulness of music, 90
 - economic weakness of independent, 126
 - in Qom, 68
 - role in Constitutional Revolution, 124
 - Shia, 193, 194
- Muslim Brotherhood, 46, 56
- al-Mustafa International University, 99–106, 116
- Najafi, Shahab al-Din Marashi, 146
- Naqdi, Gholam Reza, 57–58
- Nasrallah, Sayyed Hassan, 101–102
- National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* (Rouhani), 156
- Nation's Maddahs (*Khane-ye Maddahan-e Keshvar*), 113
- Nejat, Hossein, 11
- nuclear weapons:
- apocalyptic thinking and, 183–184
 - Islamic thoughts and, 179–182
 - Khamenei against, 96
 - political expediency and, 184–187
- Nuri, Ali Akbar Nateq, 24, 150
- Obama, Barack, 170, 197–198
- offensive jihad, 5, 179
- legitimization of, 8, 59, 178
 - objective of, 7
- Office for Cooperation Between Clergy and Hawza (*Daftar-e Hamkari-ye Howzeh va-Daneshgah*), 99
- Office for Islamic Propaganda (*Daftar-e Tablighat-e Eslami-e Qom*), 70, 144
- The Ordeal* (Aleksey Tolstoy), 47
- Organization for Religious Endowments and Charitable Affairs, 109
- Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah, 28, 36–37, 44, 53, 59, 113, 121, 139, 195
- enactment of dress code for clerics, 133

- keeping clerics out of educational and judicial systems, 55
- modernization and secularization policies, 54
- political reform agenda of, 54–55
- praying in Mecca, 62
- secular agenda of, 55
- status as an anticlerical figure, 134
- Partovi az Khorshid* (A Ray of the Sun's Light) (Shirazi), 140
- Parvaresh, Ali Akbar, 33
- Pompeo, Mike, 167
- Pour, Mehdi Mahdavi, 103
- Putin, Vladimir, 134

- qaba*, 70–71
- Qabel, Ahmad, 108
- Qadiri, Muhammad Hassan, 92
- al-Qaeda, 4
- Qajar Dynasty, 28, 53
- Qazvini, Sheikh Hashem, 30
- Qazvini, Sheikh Mojtaba, 30
- Qods Force (IRGC), 117, 131, 140, 159
- Qom, 29, 108, 136
 - clergy, 50, 102
 - marja*, 104
 - Mashhad and, 22, 49, 59
 - mujtahids* in, 68
 - seminary in, 53, 69, 72, 101–102, 110, 144–145
 - Shia holy shrines in, 44
- Qutb, Sayyid, 4–6, 46, 56, 90, 136
 - The Future Belongs to Islam*, 7, 58
 - The Future Is for Islam*, 37
 - Against Western Civilization*, 37

- Rafiqdoost, Mohsen, 28, 138
- Rafsanjani, Akbar Hashemi, 59–60, 74, 79, 85, 136, 156–158, 160, 185, 195
 - appointed in armed forces by Supreme Leader, 159
 - criticizes Khamenei, 72, 154
 - government controlled directly or indirectly by Khamenei, 150
 - information about seizure of U.S. embassy in Tehran, 63
 - Khamenei's position secondary to, 149
 - nuclear negotiators, 119

- preelection statements by, 15
 - as successor to Khomeini, 83
 - wearing *qaba*, 77
- Rahimi, Muhammad Reza, 151
- Raisi, Ebrahim, 129–131, 148–149, 152, 168, 175
- Rajai, Muhammad Ali, 66, 148–149
- Ramin, Muhammad Ali, 25
- Ramz-e Obour* (periodical), 101
- Rashad, Ali Akbar, 105–106
- Reishahri, Mohammad Mohammadi, 139, 142
- religious rulings, 192–193
- Resaleh-ye Tozih al-Masael* (Islamic Law Codes) (Montazeri), 179
- Revolutionary Guard, 56, 58, 73, 131, 196; *See also* Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
- revolutionary ideology, 17, 59, 88–90, 99, 100
- Revolutionary Organization of Islamic Masses, 10
- al-Reza, Ali ibn Musa, 41
- Rezaei, Mohsen, 185
- Reza Shah. *See* Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah
- Rouhani, Hassan, 118, 149, 161–162
 - Ali Khamenei statement on, 130
 - first-term election, 131
 - instructing Foreign Ministry to handle nuclear negotiations, 158
 - IRGC's role in national economy, 118
 - National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, 156
 - outrage toward the United States, 175
 - views on Trump, 176
 - wearing a *labbadeh*, 77
- Rushdie, Salman, 67, 136

- Sadeqi, Hojatoleslam Abdollah Haji, 176
- Sadr, Abolhassan Bani, 66, 148
- al-Sadr, Muqtada, 126
- Sadri, Mahmoud, 32
- Safavi, Navvab, 37
 - 1951 speech in Mashhad, 57
 - on implementation of sharia, 56
- Said, Edward, 90
- Saidzadeh, Mohsen, 108
- Sanatgar, Hojatoleslam Gholam Reza, 103

- Sanei, Yusuf, 71
- SAVAK (shah's intelligence and censorship service), 42
- Schmitt, Carl, 4
- Sepid O Siah* (monthly periodical), 42
- Shabestari, Mohammad Mujtahid, 108
- Shah, Ahmad, 53
- Shahroudi, Sayyed Abdul Hadi Hosseini, 154
- Shams Abadi, Abul Hassan, 9
- Shariati, Ali, 9, 31, 90
 interpretation of Islam, 45
- Shariatmadari, Ayatollah Kazem, 143–144, 175, 197
- Shirazi, Ali, 140
- Shirazi, Hajj Assadollah, 140
- Shirazi, Muhammad, 140
- Shirazi, Nasser Makarem, 70
- Sholokhov, Mikhail, 46–47
 And Quiet Flows the Don, 47
- al-Sistani, Ali, 71–72, 99, 122–123, 142, 174
- Society of Qom Seminary Teachers (*Jame-ye Madrasin-e Howzeh Elmieh Qom*), 70, 100, 131
- Sokhani-ye Samimaneh ba Rais Jomhour* (A Sincere Word with the President) (Shirazi), 140
- Soleimani, Qasem, 117, 167
- Soroush, Abdulkarim, 33
 The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge, 73
- Special Court for Clerics (*Dadgah Vizhe-ye Ruhaniat*), 94, 111, 143
- Spengler, Oswald, 44
- Steinbeck, John, 48
- Sufism, 27, 114
- Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, 94, 99
- Supreme Council for Seminaries, 144–146
- Tabari, Ehsan, 43, 56
- Tabasi, Abbas Vaez: appointed to Expediency Council, 58
 influential figure inside military, 57
 representative of the Supreme Leader in Khorasan, 58
- Tabatabai, Hossein Modarresi: *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shia Islam*, 15
- Tabatabai, Muhammad Hossein, 50
- Tabatabai, Sayyed Ali, 188

- Tabrizi, Javad, 70
- Taeb, Hojatoleslam Hossein, 111
- Taghavi, Sayyed Reza, 110
- taqiyya*, 190–191
- Tavallai, Mahmoud Zakerzadeh, 31
- Tehrani, Mirza Javad Aqa, 30
- teyyo al-arz* (teleportation), 22
- The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge* (Sorush), 73
- Theosophy and Government* (Yazdi), 72
- Thrall, Trevor, 167
- Tolstoy, Aleksey, 46–47
- The Ordeal*, 47
- Tonkaboni, Zein al-Abedein, 30
- Torbati, Sheikh Abdullah Emami, 30
- Treaty of Ahl-e Zemmah, 179
- Trump, Donald, 168–170, 172, 175–176, 198
- aggressive attitude of, 176
- “maximum pressure” policy, 171, 197
- speech at UN General Assembly, 173
- Tudeh Party, 134
- Umm al-Kitab, 103
- United States:
- embassy occupied in Tehran, 59, 61
- hostage crisis in, 86
- Islamic Republic normalizing relations with, 67
- maligning reputation of, 172–176
- military threat not taken seriously by Ahmadinejad, 23
- policy in Iraq, 174
- political protest against “the Imperialism,” 20
- public diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran, 196
- seizure of embassy in Tehran, 63, 64
- John Steinbeck and Howard Fast supposedly mistreated in, 48
- war against Iraq, 26
- withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 173
- usul*, 106–107
- Vali, Shah Nematollah, 21
- Varai, Sayyed Javad, 178

- velayat-e faqih*, vii, 5, 12, 23, 34, 39, 65, 67, 72–74, 79–82, 90, 92, 132, 136, 144, 146, 154, 172, 191
- Velayati, Ali Akbar, 33
- velayatis*, 29, 34–35
- Wahhabism, 35, 114
- wealth, distribution of, 151–152
- weapons of mass destruction (WMD):
 forbidden by Islam, 188–190
 Islamic legality of using, 195
- “Westoxication” (Jalal al-e Ahmad), 168
- Wilde, Oscar, 71
- Wolin, Sheldon, 11
- women clergy, 106–107
- Yazdi, Abdul Karim Haeri, 54–55, 69, 72
- Yazdi, Muhammad, 138
- Zamani, Mohammad Hassan, 102
- Zanjani, Musa Shobeiri, 70
- Zarghami, Ezzatollah, 141
- Zarif, Mohammad, 158

The Author



MEHDI KHALAJI is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shia groups in the Middle East. Previously, he was a political analyst on Iranian affairs for BBC Persian and later became a broadcaster for the Prague-based Radio Farda, the Persian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Khalaji trained in Shia theology and jurisprudence in Qom. His Institute publications include a piece on Iran's 2021 presidential vote and *Reading Trump in Tehran*, an analysis of Iranian interpretations of the former U.S. president.



The Washington Institute
for Near East Policy
1111 19th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036
202 452 0650
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG

ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London
4501 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706
301 459 3366 | WWW.ROWMAN.COM

